



Deathrealm

The Land Where Horror Dwells

ISSUE # 21, SPRING 1994

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Wayne Allen Sallee

P. D. Cacek

Brooks Caruthers

Karl Edward Wagner

NEXT ISSUE:

Koontz Watch

*Keeping Up With
Dean R. Koontz*

~ & ~

*The Last Days of
John Wayne Gacy*





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DEATHREALM #21 SPRING, 1994

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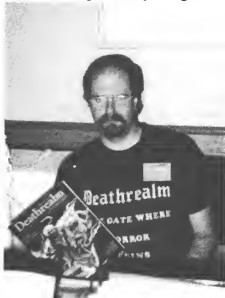
R. I. P.

Editorial ReMarks By Stephen Mark Rainey

THINGS LOOK A little blurry at the moment, 'cause I'm just getting used to one of these newfangled disposable contact lenses, now having seen through world through scratchy, bent glasses for about a year too many. I used to wear those irritating hard contacts--or rather, *a* contact, since I've only got one bad eye; guy I used to work with always wanted to get me a monocle, so I could look like Colonel Klink and shout, "Hooogaan!" a lot. Anyway, despite the blur, from where I'm sitting (precariously--my next acquisition is going to be a replacement for this rickety desk chair) the issue appears to have shaped up rather nicely, apart from some art that didn't arrive by the deadline, forcing me to make alternate arrangements at the last minute. Tal and the rest of the DEATHREALM crew are going great guns trying to whip this monster into shape (stubborn little beast it is, too), and I think we're making some headway. We've picked up new distribution in Canada, and even more extensive distribution in this country and overseas. DEATHREALM may be an unruly child, but like a lot of unruly kids, it's attracting attention--in the best way possible--which I hope will be an ongoing trend, to insure that these issues will keep winding up in your bloody little claws to appease that ravenous appetite of yours. Let me hear those stomachs roaring out there!

In keeping with our promise to continue delivering delightfully devilish new departments (sorry), we're launching *The Graven Image* this issue, to focus on what's happening in the film/TV/video industries, featuring assorted tidbits from the sci-fi/horror/fantasy scene, as well as reviews of movies ranging from the blockbusters to

obscure little gems that you might find



Ye Editor and his young 'un, giving the cameraman one of his well-practiced scowls. Maybe he just came from the Post Office.

lurking in a corner at your local video parlor. As always, we welcome your input.

Next issue, we will introduce what we hope to keep as a regular column, namely, a spotlight on the life and works of Dean Koontz, whose contributions to the horror field have been noteworthy indeed. Deliverer of said package will be announced in either the April or May TAL Media Update.

By now, news is out that William G. Raley is closing down **AFTER HOURS**, one of the most reliable and longer-lived small press magazines on the market. He's scheduled the shutdown well in advance, and is going about the business in a very responsible manner, which we've come to expect from him and appreciate. AH typically has delivered a fine collection of fiction, and is known for its commendable

treatment of its writers. This is a marker that'll be missed, and I urge you to support it in the few months it has left. See the profile of editor Raley in this issue for more details.

By the time you read this, **DEATHREALM** will be closed to all unsolicited submissions, and will be until June 1, 1994. We're booked up for several issues and the "staff" and I need a respite to take care of some of our own personal projects. The volume of manuscripts pouring in has been quite staggering, and the mailman has had to carry a whole extra bag just to deliver here. Poor man. Though with some of the recent postal problems I've had to deal with--mostly due to pure unadulterated incompetence--and with the announced postal increase for next year, I'm afraid sympathy from this quarter is pretty much non-existent. If I did my job as well as most of the P. Officials I've had to deal with, I wouldn't have a job.

I know, I know. We've got the best postal system in the world, and I should be grateful I can send a letter across country for a "mere" 29 cents. Yeah, okay, whatever you say.

Well, provided the Post Awful has done something resembling its job and gotten this issue to your mailbox, or your local newsstand, I hope you'll find something to please your palate and you'll come back for more next time.

Just don't forget the tip.

Stephen Mark Rainey,
Editor

INSIDE HORROR

WATCHING WILLIAMSON

J.N. WILLIAMSON, whose original short fiction has appeared in recent issues of *DEATHREALM*, *DEAD OF NIGHT*, and *BIZARRE BAZAAR* '94, published a hardcover novel (*THE BOOK OF WEBSTER'S*), a paperback original (*DON'T TAKE ANY THE LIGHT*), and chapbook collection (*THE FIFTH SEASON* from Three-Stones Press, Ltd.) in 1993. He has just sold a novel in progress—working title: *REDS & WHITES*—to Longmeadow Press for hardcover release scheduled for Halloween this year! *DON'T TAKE ANY THE LIGHT* was tied for second place in recent nominations for HWAB Bram Stoker Award. Asked what he does for fun these days, the hard-working Hoosier Horrormeister gasped: "I heave a lot."

JEFFREY OSIER RELEASES DRIFTGLIDER



Jeffrey Osier, left, with DEATHREALM editor Rainey. Note ye editor's ill-concealed attempt to tip the vending machine on Mr. Osier's head.

JEFFREY OSIER, well-known author and artist, whose works have often graced *DEATHREALM's* pages, has seen the release of his first collection of short stories, released by Montilla Publications.

Included in the collection are revised editions of stories reprinted from the pages of *DEATHREALM*, *GRUE*, and others, as well as several new tales, including the title story *Drift-glider*.

The book is illustrated by 23 original pieces of art, also by Mr. Osier. It may be ordered from Montilla Publications, 106 Hanover Ave., Pawtucket, RI 02861, for \$9.95 + \$1.05 postage & handling.

WHERE--OR WHO-- IN THE WORLD IS NANCY KILPATRICK?

MASQUERADE BOOKS HAS just released the first novel in their new erotic horror line. *THE DARKER PASSIONS* will be a series, authored by Nancy Kilpatrick using a pseudonym which is at present Not-to-be-Named. At the time she signed on with Masquerade Books, Pocket Books owned the rights to her real name. The first in the series, *DRACULA*, will be followed later this year by *DR. JEKYLL & MR. HYDE*, then *FRANKENSTEIN*.

Nancy is also editing *LOVE BITES*, an anthology of erotic vampire fiction for Masquerade Books, including stories by: Nancy Collins, Ron Dee, David Dvorin, Kathy Ptacek, Karen Taylor, Lois Tilton and others, due out this year.

NECON 14 ANNOUNCED

NECON 14 HAS been officially announced for 1994, which is wonderful news to many who thought this most celebrated gathering might have turned its toes up after several years of declining attendance. Necon has always been noted for its informal atmosphere, the many entertaining and informative events, and the marked absence of scantly-clad fat people boasting pointed ears and/or phasers. And no filking!

Necon 14 will be held July 28-31 at Bryant College in Smithfield, RI. The writer guests of honor will be Brian Lumley and Rick Hautala; artist guest of honor will be Rick Berry; and Berkeley editor Ginja Buchanan is scheduled as Toastmaster.

Memberships (include 2 nights lodging and 6 fabulous meals) are \$180 singles; \$170 if you have a roommate. These rates go up by \$19 after June 1.

To register, or for more information, write: NECON 14, Jim Anderson, chairman, PO Box 9202, Warwick, RI 02889. Phone: (401) 739-2060.

CRAZY AKHBAR IS COMING (AGAIN)!

ADAM-TROY CASTRO, who last year offered us *CRAZY AKHBAR'S HOUSE OF PAIN* as a limited edition mail order catalog of merchandise no one in his right mind would want to own, all by some of the most well-known names in the business, is doing it again with *CRAZY AKHBAR II*. This time it's a travel guide to the fictional country of Malvestia, which is

located somewhere between Transylvania and Hell, a place no human in his right mind would ever wish to go. Contributors include John Betancourt, Janet Gluckman, Nina Kinki Hoffman, Lisa Lepovetsky, Billie Sue Mosiman, Dan Perez, Steve Rasnic Tem, Lois Tilton, Lawrence Watt-Evans, David Niall Wilson, and *DEATHREALM's* own editor Mark Rainey and assistant editor Danielle D'Attilio.

No ordering information is currently available, but the book was slated to be available at the 1994 World Horror Convention.

TYING THE KNOT



The new Mrs. Griffin, formerly Marni Scofidio, with her husband, William. That's her under the hat, for those in doubt.

MARNI SCOFIDIO, AUTHOR of last issue's *The Wizard of Odd*—Profile of D.F. Lewis (who was erroneously omitted from the contents page and *Who's Who* page—our apologies!) is now Marni Griffin, as she's recently gotten hitched, as we say down south (in the U.S., that is). She and her husband William are living in London, and she plans to use her married name professionally, at last saving her from all that mail that comes addressed to "Mr. Scofidio."

Naturally, we at *DEATHREALM* offer the Griffins best wishes for a long life and a happy death.

ERRATA CUM DOGDOO

WE AT *DEATHREALM* must offer our apologies, not only to Mrs. Griffin for having ignored her in the contents page but to anyone confused after scanning said page of last issue, then trying to find a particular feature by page number. Several of the page numbers were screwed up rather royally the reasons for which have not been positively ascertained, though we suspect some kind of other-worldly subversion.

Shadows Out From Ye

Ye Lettre Columnne

Tim Walters
Muskogee, OK

I ENJOY THE unique and candid views espoused by D. F. Lewis in *Tentacles Across the Atlantic*. Unlike his detractors, I enjoy his frequent allusions to William Blake's ethereal poetry. Blake's words have survived the centuries and are a perennial influence on literature and popular culture (e.g., *The Doors*). *Tentacles* presents a distinctly British perspective and suffers only from brevity. Thanks to Marni Scofidio for a fascinating profile of an enigmatic Englishman.

Congratulations, Mr. Rainey and his minions, for the rapidly escalating circulation of *DEATHREALM*. In the summer of 1992, I was firmly convinced that *DEATHREALM* was dead, destined to become a nostalgic collectible for the discerning disciple of the dark genre. As 1994 dawns, *DEATHREALM* is available in such mainstream outlets as Hastings and Barnes & Noble! Well done, Messrs. Rainey, Tal, et. al. I hope you guys are soon describing the term "small press" as an oxymoron. I'm glad I've been around to watch you grow.

Frederick Stansfield
Ithaca, NY

THE COVER OF issue #20 undoubtedly provoked the majority of comments from *DEATHREALM*'s correspondents, and since Fassl's genius is a given, I'll simply agree beforehand with the flood of praise I'm convinced will appear in the letter column, and concentrate my attentions elsewhere.

D. F. Lewis is a fascinating writer, and it is his ability to create highly-readable vignettes such as *Night of the Lovelies* that leads me to believe I am at fault for not understanding so

many of his more oblique stories. I often feel like a child being amicably spoken down to as I read Lewis, and have on more than one occasion wanted to interrupt with, "But, wait! Why? And to what end?" If the illusion is thorough enough, and the wizard skilled enough, the quest is worth one's while, let it all evanesce at the close as it may.

I'm sure Jeanne Cavelos will have much interesting information to impart in future issues, but I found this go round rather a rehash of commonly made observations. For God's sake, though, I don't mean to rankle with this criticism a potential publisher of my nearly completed novel! A thousand pardons, Ms. Cavelos: yet I should think your position in the publishing world stands your ego in good stead.

My initial dislike of William Bowers' *The Diabolist*, based upon a fallacious belief that I knew where he was taking it, quickly turned to surprise and admiration at the clever ending. The portrait of Thomas Glanvill was wholly consistent and convincing, as well the unfortunate Miss Carstairs' delineation. Teach me to charge in with my preconceptions!

Oh, yes, and the agency of Willard Fox Heart's deliverance was also a sight to behold, and a fine climax to a well-told tale.

Mr. Rainey, how might we convince this devilishly handsome Tal fellow to have a go at a bimonthly publication schedule?

S. Darnbrook Colson
Leesburg, VA

IN RESPONSE TO Jeffrey Thomas' remarks in #20's letter column about my story *Judge, Jury, Executioner & Chef Salad* (*DEATHREALM* #19): I'm sorry he didn't care for it. On the other hand, I did like his offering, *Cells*, although I liked his brother's,

Scott Thomas' *Photos of a Leg* better. I'd be more than pleased to send an autographed copy of my story in *DEATHREALM* to any of my fans in JEFFREY THOMAS' S. DARNBROOK COLSON APPRECIATION SOCIETY.

Brian McNaughton
Neptune, NJ

I LOVED *DEATHREALM* #20, the first issue I have seen.

I liked the Trotter story, but I also am a sucker for military and historical stuff. Some years ago I began to gather materials for a long novel about the San Patricio Brigade in the Mexican War—fascinating stuff, Irish-American deserters who crossed over and fought for the Mexicans—but I was ultimately scared away by all the research & travel I would need to get it done right.

The interview with D.F. Lewis intrigued me more than his story—though he might have had an off day—but I will seek out more of his work.

The story by that Kilpatrick person did not disappoint. And I heartily approve Andrea Locke's efforts to cut through all the fannish bullshit in her reviews.

My second favorite thing in all the world is discovering a story by a new and presumably young writer that blows me away completely, especially when he's sold to markets like *ANALOG*.

Would you please send me a lock of Mark Rich's hair? Or maybe a few fingernail-parings? Aw, never mind, I'll just mail him a bomb. Him and that pesky Ligotti. AND Osier. There are far too many geniuses running around loose nowadays, and horror won't be safe for tired old hacks like me until they are all taken out and shot like house dogs.

GRRRRRRRRR....

Ian McDowell
Greensboro, NC

CONGRATULATIONS ON *DEATHREALM* #20. The copy-editing has improved and the magazine is looking good (although, frankly, some of the art is still pretty lame). I particularly

enjoyed Bill Trotter's story, especially the evocative setting and the period feel, which made up for the familiar plot. Karl Wagner's column was also quite entertaining, but it inadvertently raised a few troubling issues.

Understand, this is neither a comment on Karl's personal life, which I know nothing about and which wouldn't be any of my business if I did, nor upon his column, which was characteristically funny. Still, the regular references to pints being sunk turned over a few rocks in my head, disturbing grubs which had been wriggling there since the World Fantasy Convention.

At World Fantasy, I listened as a major genre editor launched into an impassioned tirade about what alcoholism, specifically socially-sanctioned, fandom-encouraged alcoholism, has done to some of the giants in the SF/Fantasy field (for instance, this editor felt, that by their active encouragement of his drinking problem, fans had helped make a shambles out of Gordon Dickson's career). God, I don't want to sound like some humorless, politically correct, moderation-preaching health nut, decrying the bacchanalian revelry so dear to the creative soul, but this has become a sore subject for me. I've seen too many authors whose work I once admired turn out to be pathetic besotted assholes when I met them at conventions. Nor am I blameless in this regard. Not long after my thirtieth birthday, I woke up on the bathroom floor, my face plastered to the tiles by a dried mixture of vomit and blood from where I'd split my forehead on the toilet bowl. Stuck fast by my own filth, eye-to-eye with the cockroaches that had emerged from behind the plumbing to sample this new delicacy, I realized I was turning into my father.

Now, after decades of drinking, dad had recently gone into detox, and I myself haven't gotten that stifted in a blessed while. Still, the precipice is near, and it would be easy to tumble off again. I think a lot of us need to give the heroic myth of The Writer-as-Two-Fisted Drinker some critical

thought.

Elizabeth Massie
Waynesboro, VA

I'VE READ THE newest issue of **DEATHREALM** and am writing with some observations....

Loved the photo of the ghoulish gang hosting the Halloween party. Glad to hear you kept the neighbors at bay for the evening. Neighbors need to be put in their places every so often. As to the artwork this go 'round, I think Harry Fassl did a superlative work of genius for the cover. Damn, but it's nightmarish! And I also loved Augie Wiedemann's one-eyed doll piece. Ever since seeing the poster for *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* as a kid, dolls have the ability to stab me with genuine chills. However, I found the art piece by David Transue (for Deidra Cox's *The Price of the Flames*) to be lopsided and emotionless. Also, it didn't capture the mood of the tale at all but spelled out the climax. Not something a short story writer wants to have happen.

The stories, as usual, were enjoyable. *House Dogs* was going to be my favorite of the batch. Mark Rich has a fantastic flare with words; his images and pacing and relentless style are addicting. I read to the end, savoring it all, and when all was said and done, I didn't get it. Okay, I may have a thicker skull than some, but in spite of the creepiness of the hairless kittens demanding the first born, I didn't get the whole lead up. *The Siren of Swanquarter* by William Trotter was first rate and a fine story. *The Diabolist* by William Bowers was truly scary. Deidra Cox's tale was unsettling and sad in a bloody way. Speaking of Deidra, I really enjoyed her interview, and I keep my fingers crossed that a smart publisher will snatch up her novel soon.

So glad to know that **DEATHREALM's** audience is growing due to effort by that amazing man-about-horror, Stan Tal. Like the incriminating photo of him. Is that his Siamese twin head growing out of his shoulder? I knew that Stan resembled pre-surgery

Basket Case, but I thought he had the good taste to keep little Ricky out of sight. Tell him to put his cape back on next time before the photo session begins. It might upset women and nervous persons.

Steven L. Shrewsbury
Pontiac, IL

DEATHREALM #20 certainly had an arresting cover. Neatly eerie. *The Siren of Swanquarter* was really entertaining. I can tell that Mr. Trotter had thoroughly studied the Civil War ((an understatement indeed; take it from one who knows--Ye Ed)). Combining elements of H. P. Lovecraft and the Civil War made for a great tale. I was sort of disappointed at the ending, which seemed to adhere too closely to the H. P. Mythos...but I would hate to nit pick so! The other stand out tale in #20 was *The Diabolist*. The reason I liked it was that the ending was truly unexpected. I kept guessing that I had the ending figured out and...wham! Thanks!

Unfortunately, I did not find the other fiction in this issue that gripping. *Truth* was sort of interesting, and *The Mirror* was OK. But the others didn't click for me. *The Price of the Flames* really left me feeling cheated. I kept asking myself after I read it, what made this tale stand out enough to be accepted? It was the typical "Guy picks up a hitchhiker for sacrifice" story that I've read a hundred times. Since it was so ordinary, I kept waiting for some kind of punch that never came. *House Dogs* was pretty good, but a bit too long. It played out a concept beaten to death after the first page or so. ((?!?! -- Ye Ed.)) As far as D. F. Lewis goes, I have never figured out why his stuff is so popular. I was glad to learn in the interview with him that I might not be the only one who doesn't get his style. Well--to each his own.

I liked the poetry. I would like to see more of it in the future.

(Continued on page 20)

A TIGHT SITUATION

By
Don D'Amassa



CHERIE NEVER WOULD have crawled into the hole in the first place if she hadn't been desperate.

For the past two nights, she'd slept in an abandoned lean-to in the woods not far from where she first heard the men talking. Her father's anger had grown deeper and more violent recently, and being conveniently at hand, Cherie was its most common target. She learned by hard experience that it was safest to stay out of sight, and reach, until the moods passed and this wasn't the first time she'd packed a few things and slipped off into the undeveloped part of Managansett to wait out the storm.

"But the Narragansett Indians weren't mound builders!" She'd been picking berries when the voices grew loud enough to hear, had slipped quietly through the heavy underbrush to a point where she could listen without being seen.

"And these carvings are atypical of the Narragansetts. It's just like that dig down in Ecuador, and the one in

Bulawayo." The taller of the two men was gesturing at the steep rockface that lined the cleft where they stood atop an oblong mound of earth about ten meters long. Someone had cleared away part of the blanket of vines and lichen revealing bare rock decorated with fading shapes and symbols. "Even where more sophisticated renditions of the human form are prevalent, the stickman stands out as a consistent anomaly."

"Some kind of racial archetype?" The shorter man was more animated, kept walking back and forth while he talked. "The context is too consistent to be coincidental. Always the images of conflict and imprisonment. Unless it's an elaborate hoax!"

"Look around, Hal. This isn't a recent formation; the flora are too well established. And the weathering on the carvings looks authentic. I don't know what we'll find under that capstone, but I wouldn't be surprised if this is one of the most valuable discoveries ever in this part of the country.

There was evidence of buried chambers at the other sites, perhaps hidden rooms where the builders could hide from their enemies like they did on Easter Island. But the others had all collapsed. There's a good chance this one's intact and if so, it's a treasure chest waiting to be opened."

She'd been losing interest in the conversation but that last sentence caught her attention. When Cherie dropped out of school on her sixteenth birthday, no one tried to talk her out of it. She wasn't unintelligent, just uninvolved; algebra and the history of Egypt and the difference between xylem and phloem didn't seem relevant in a world that included alcoholic fathers with heavy fists and a mother who hadn't spoken or left her hospital room in four years. Teachers had long since given up expecting class participation, let alone homework, and were secretly glad to see her go.

Cherie may have flunked economics, but she knew that money meant independence, escape from the trap she found herself in.

"And you think it's linked to some obscure legend you uncovered in Indonesia?" Hal knelt and examined something on the ground, something invisible to Cherie even though she craned her head above the brush, risking discovery.

"I think there's some connection. In the remote islands, they talk about a race of people, creatures that walked out of a hole in the sky and infested their land. They were bones without flesh, small as a child but impossible to kill. Supposedly their ancestors were preparing to flee until a landslide immobilized one of the invaders, and a wise chief noticed that they were comparatively helpless when surrounded by earth."

"So they buried them all?"

"More or less. And cut off from sight of the sky, the stickmen pined away and died."

"What do you expect to find buried here?"

"We won't know until we look, and we can't do that without equipment and help. Let's put it back the way it was for the time being and get to the car before it gets dark." Storm clouds had already brought a premature dusk to the world, emphasized here under a heavy mantle of foliage.

There was a brief silence as the two men struggled to accomplish some mysterious task. "That'll do for now."

"Right. The weather's supposed to be clear by morning. Let's plan on getting here by eight."

She waited until she could no longer hear the sound of their passage before descending.

At first, Cherie couldn't figure out what they'd been talking about. The mound seemed perfectly natural to her, a rounded swelling of soil covered with denuded blueberry bushes and some bracken. There was a litter of stones, mostly fallen from the cliff face, a few larger ones half buried in the earth. Funny figures and symbols were carved on the exposed rock above her head, but she saw nothing there that held either interest or meaning.

Then she noticed that a largish rock near her foot was also decorated with carvings, three stick figures. Two of them were primitive reproductions of the human form, each with a horizontal line drawn beneath the feet; the third was similar

except that the body was drawn in a series of sharp angles, as though to suggest that it was similar to but different from that of a human being. In this case, the horizontal line was above its head. The stone was almost perfectly circular and when Cherie knelt down and felt around the edges, she realized it lay within a concave depression with an almost exactly complementary shape.

It took fifteen minutes to remove, and even then she only managed by finding a long pole and levering it inch by inch out of its resting place.

Light didn't penetrate very far inside and because the opening descended at a forty five degree angle, she couldn't gauge its depth by dropping a stone. Cherie sat on the edge, dangled her legs inside, thinking. It looked like it might be a tight fit, but she figured she could manage it. If she dared.

She'd have to act today since the two men planned to return in the morning, but she couldn't just climb down inside without some kind of plan, some preparation. Cherie forced herself to think things through, and a few minutes later scrambled to her feet. When she returned from the lean-to, equipped with a flashlight and a full canteen of water, she was wearing jeans and an old sweater over her blouse.

First decision. Head or feet first? She didn't know what was down there, maybe some animal had made its lair inside, and the idea of sticking her face into a nest of snakes or rats or whatever was unnerving. Bugs didn't bother her, not much anyway, but there were limits to her tolerance there as well. On the other hand, if she descended with feet ahead, she wouldn't be able to see what she was getting into until it was too late.

The walls looked tight, even for her slim body, and there was as much rock as soil, some of it rough and sharp enough to be dangerous. Impatient with her own indecisiveness, Cherie stuck her head inside, used the flashlight to examine the space ahead, and squirmed forward.

The descent was gradual at first, and she used the flashlight regularly to avoid surprises. There were a couple of places where the walls pressed tightly against her body as she passed, particularly at hips and shoulders, but in each case a twist of her body allowed free passage. The canteen created an additional problem, but she was unwilling to give it up and kept shifting the strap so that it pressed against different parts of her body, depending on the configuration of the walls. The closeness was oppressive but she refused to think about the possibility of getting stuck. The whole idea was freighted with unpleasant images from an old horror film she'd seen as a child, where someone was buried alive and panicked inside the coffin.

About five meters down the tunnel levelled, although it was still too narrow to rise to hands and knees. The ceiling was mostly chunks of rock, some with sharp edges that occasionally scraped against her back. The earth was dry and crumbling and rivulets of sand rained down, getting inside her blouse and jeans. Cherie was already damp with sweat; the evening air was cool but squirming through the earth was more work than she'd expected. She paused long enough to painstakingly

remove the sweater, with barely enough room to manage the maneuver. When it was finally off, she used one hand to push it back down the length of her body toward her feet before continuing.

Seconds later she found the dagger. Only the hilt was visible, rising from the earth in which it had been buried, and she might have dismissed it as just another stone if she hadn't noticed the carving. The wavery limbed stick figure again, this time completely enclosed in what might almost have been a vase. Cherie pulled it from the ground, noted the crude metal blade, almost discarded it before she realized it might be helpful if she needed to wide the tunnel later on.

She slid it point first inside the canteen cover where it couldn't come loose.

The passage stayed level for a few more meters, then turned steeply downward. Cherie's discomfort grew more intense, and she wondered if she might have been better off leading with her feet. Too late to change now, she realized. To retreat would mean to crawl backward, awkward and uncomfortable at best. One of the men had mentioned a hidden room; she'd just have to continue until she found it and turn around there.

There was nothing to indicate animals used this passage, no droppings, bones, animal hairs, nothing at all. In fact, she hadn't seen any insects either, no earthworms, ants, spiders. It was quiet down here, she realized, a funny sort of leaden silence that pressed against her ears. And the soil smelled vaguely sour, acidic, reminding her of chemistry class.

Test tubes with corks in them.

The angle became so steep that she paused, wondering if perhaps this wasn't such a good idea after all. Claustrophobia wasn't a problem; before she was old enough to fend for herself in the woods, she'd hidden from her father's rages in various places in the house, closets, inside a wardrobe, under the kitchen sink. If anything, the closeness of her surroundings provided a sense of security. There was such a thing as too close, though. But Cherie had a stubborn streak that had led to increasingly dangerous confrontations with her father in recent years, so she wasn't about to quit without a much better reason than simple uncertainty.

Ten minutes later she reached a junction.

There was a cross tunnel, an intersection large enough that she could almost sit up by rolling over and pulling her knees close. Her muscles had been cramping badly and this new position felt wonderful after the first few seconds of blinding pain.

"This had better be worth it," she said aloud, just to break the silence, but the walls seemed to soak up the sound and left her feeling vaguely disquieted. There'd be no problem reversing position here, and she could crawl back to the surface with no difficulty. And she almost did it, almost abandoned her explorations, might have done so if a sudden memory of the towering, raging form of her father hadn't flickered across her consciousness.

There were worse things than crawling through earthen tunnels.

The flashlight didn't reveal anything informative in either direction, so she chose the right fork more or less at random, started forward once again.

It was easy going at first, the tunnel level and larger than before, although the surface was rough enough to tear at her clothing and abrade flesh, particularly knees and elbows. She'd learned to ignore pain. Cherie settled into a regular rhythm, moving a few meters, then pausing to catch her breath and use the flashlight to illuminate the way ahead.

Then the angle started downward again, just a little at first, then sharply. Earlier the tightness of the walls had retarded her movement, now the comparatively wider passage made the going dangerous. Twice she lost her balance and slid forward jarringly before recovering. After that, she braced her legs against the walls of the tunnel, advancing more slowly but more securely.

When the tunnel changed direction sharply, almost straight down, she hesitated.

Even with the flashlight, the darkness seemed to press in from all sides. Occasional sounds reached her from elsewhere in the tunnel system, probably falling sand, the earth stretching its own muscles. Cherie thought of all the reasonable explanations, but couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't alone down here, that someone else was present, aware of her, even watching somehow despite the inky blackness where her own light didn't touch.

She was also aware of the real danger that she might injure herself and never be found. This latest downturn was particularly frightening, and Cherie even made some tentative efforts to back away, discovering that it was indeed as awkward as she had expected. But then it occurred to her that the very difficulty of the passage might be a clue to its resolution, that if there was indeed any treasure to be found within the mound, its former owners might well have made access as difficult as possible.

She reversed course and started down.

Ten minutes later, disaster nearly struck. The walls had zigzagged twice, a sharp edged "S" curve which she'd negotiated with great difficulty, extensive cursing, and at the cost of scraped palms and a bump on the side of her head. Then the tunnel straightened suddenly, widened, and she almost slipped, recovered only by desperately pressing her arms against the walls, losing the flashlight in the process.

It fell into the darkness.

Fortunately, it didn't have far to go, and even more fortunately, it didn't break when it landed. Once she'd recovered her composure, Cherie descended the rest of the way, finding herself in a dead end. No treasure, just a thick carpet of what looked like twigs but which she eventually realized were animal bones. White, pencil thin, desiccated and brittle. They looked very old and there was no smell of death or decay. Judging by the skulls, they were field mice, or perhaps squirrels. There was no sign of flesh or fur to confirm either alternative.

There was also insufficient room to turn around.

Cherie had a headache, possibly because of the unusual

exertion and tension, more likely because she'd essentially been standing on her head for the past twenty minutes. Now she had no choice but to crawl back, upside down, despite the tremors that were rippling through her arms and legs.

But there was no alternative, and waiting in her present position would only make things more difficult. Cherie twisted slightly, pressed her body as far to one side as possible so she could play the cone of her light back the way she would have to go, trying to decide how best to proceed.

Something moved up above, something which might just have been a trick of the shadows. Or might not. The lower end of the "S" curve obstructed her view.

Shadow or animal, trick of the light or poisonous reptile, Cherie had no choice but to climb back out, essentially blind until she reached the level tunnel above, and after that she'd still have to crawl backwards at least till the junction, which now seemed almost impossibly distant.

It was even more difficult than she had expected. A sharp point of rock caught the seam of her jeans at one point and slit open half the pants leg on that side, scratching the flesh of her calf painfully in the process. She didn't think she was bleeding but had no way to check. The first angle of the curve was so

difficult she had to rest for several minutes with her body contorted into an uncomfortable shape, and when she finally tried to continue, cramps immobilized her. Cherie blinked away tears of pain and exhaustion as she used her fingers to relax the rigid muscles.

She hadn't owned a wrist-watch since her father smashed her brand new Swatch under his heel a year earlier, so she had no way of measuring time. It felt as though she'd been underground for days, weeks even, and surely it must have been at least a couple of hours. The ache in her head had settled to a dull throbbing and she'd turned off the light to conserve the battery; at this point she could learn more from the sense of touch than sight.

Her mood improved when she finally cleared the top half of the curve. The realization that she was through the worst provided the strength to keep moving in a steady progression of knees and forearms. It wasn't until her feet discovered an anomaly that she began to panic.

At first it was just puzzling, a spur of rock where she didn't remember having encountered one before, at least not anything of this size. It seemed to jut down directly from above rather than from one of the side walls, which made no sense, and when her probing feet could provide no further information, she pressed herself to one side and resorted to the flashlight.

There were two passages leading up, divided neatly by a wedge of stone, each indistinguishable from the other. Obviously she hadn't noticed this divergent passage on the way down. Both routes were at roughly the same angle but diverged from each other, with nothing to distinguish either one.

She had turned so many times during her descent and subsequent return, she had no way of guessing which led back to the surface.

Suppressing her growing fear by refusing to think about anything but the immediate decision at hand, Cherie chose the rightmost path and continued her backward crawl.

It was soon obvious she'd chosen incorrectly because when she at last found herself on level ground, and under level ground as well, it lasted for only a short distance, then started to drop away. For the first time since she'd started, Cherie was descending in a relatively upright position. Once again she hesitated.

"Get your ass out of here, girl." Her voice was even stranger this time, echoing in the distance, truncated so that it came back sounding as though someone had answered, "Gonna get your ass, girl!", which was clearly impossible. Common sense told her to go back to the fork, work her way around as well, and return to the surface, get out of here for once and all. But now that she wasn't quite so uncomfortable, even her headache having faded to an almost negligible pain, it occurred to her that retreating now would mean the entire episode had been for nothing. And for all she knew, an incredible horde of buried gold or

jewels or something equally valuable might lie ahead.

"Shit!" She used the flashlight to explore below her feet, half hoping to discover another dead end, but the passage curved away from the cone of light and continued deeper.

"Maybe I'll just go a little

further."

The echo replied, "Go a little further". And she did.

Twenty meters and two gentle curves later, she groped with one foot, felt the rock she was grasping turn under the palm of one hand, tried to shift her weight and lost hold completely. Her rear end skidded down a sandy slope for a split second before she suddenly became airborne, briefly, ending with a stunning impact.

She'd dropped the flashlight again but it was still working and Cherie discovered she'd fallen into an underground room of some kind. The chamber was tall enough that she could stand up after a fashion, although even at five foot three, she was forced to crouch. The floor was roughly circular, measuring about four meters in diameter. Walls and ceiling were lined with stones, most of which were decorated with stick figures similar to the ones she'd seen above. A second passageway, indistinguishable from the one by which she'd just entered, led upward from the opposite side. The floor was hardpacked earth, the smooth surface decorated only by a handful of broken stones. And a small ceramic pot or urn.

At first she thought this was it, her fortune was made, imagining Ali Baba finding a bucket of jewels in a cave, already wondering how she'd go about converting whatever she found to cash. But the urn was empty and her disappointment

Even with the flashlight, the darkness seemed to press in from all sides...Cherie couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't alone down here, that someone else was present, aware of her, even watching somehow despite the inky blackness where her own light didn't touch...

was so intense, she burst into quiet tears, wiping them away with the back of one filthy hand. Even the pottery itself was a washout; a large chunk of stone had fallen from the ceiling, shattering the lid and sending cracks spiderwebbing down through the sides.

Cherie slumped next to the entranceway, sitting with her back against the wall. She was angry with the men who'd lied to her about there being a treasure here, illogical as that anger might be, angry with herself for pressing forward when she had known it was time to cut her losses and retreat. But most of all she was exhausted, her body crying out for rest, and eventually, despite a growing anxiety about the situation into which she'd thrown herself, Cherie turned off the light and set it down beside her hip, leaned forward with her arms crossed and supported by her knees, and fell asleep.

It couldn't have lasted long in such an awkward position, and when she raised her head after some uncertain period of time, she had a sense that she had never really lost consciousness at all. What disturbed her was the undeniable feeling that she was no longer alone, that someone had touched her hair a moment before, just brushing it slightly.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" Of course there wasn't, but she was just sleepy enough not to be entirely sensible. Her voice was raw and thin, and even a few sips from the canteen did little to help. She fumbled for the flashlight, but it seemed to have rolled out of reach. Cherie spread her arms wide, moving them back and forth in ever widening circles.

"Now where in the hell did that get to?"

There were no holes in the floor, no real features that might have concealed it. On all fours, she increased the range of her search, carefully at first, then with increased desperation. Then panic. She crawled from one side of the chamber to the other, back and forth, then diagonally, turning and twisting each time she thought she sensed an unexamined patch of ground. Nothing. Her frantic, disorganized search only ended when she banged her head against a stone embedded in one of the walls with enough force to jar her back to rationality.

But when she methodically repeated the search, a systematic back and forth pattern that covered every inch of the chamber at least twice, she still hadn't found the light. Which meant it wasn't here at all. Which meant someone or something had taken it.

She wasn't alone.

A light came on suddenly, very faint, from out of the throat of one of the exit passages. As though someone had just turned on a flashlight. As indeed was the case.

Cherie moved to the opening, hesitated. Was this the way she had come in, or the unexplored tunnel? During her momentary panic, she'd lost her orientation. Not that it mattered. Whatever risk might be involved, she was going toward the light. It was bad enough being alone in the dark in this place; discovering she was no longer alone in the dark was even worse.

She crawled in.

The light kept moving, beckoning her onward through a series of level sections and slight inclines and drops, finally

emerging into a second chamber, this one much larger than the first, oval in shape, perhaps twenty meters long. At the far end, her flashlight was wedged into the ground, the cone of light extending straight up toward the ceiling.

The walls and ceiling, even the floor, were riddled with scores, hundreds of small tunnels, none bigger than her thigh. It was like being inside a gigantic, barren honeycomb. There didn't appear to be any other exits, and no sign of whoever, or whatever, had led her here.

"I'm warning you, stop messing around!"

The echoed whispered, "Messing around."

She took a tentative step toward the flashlight, scanning her surroundings. In addition to the small tunnels, there were dozens of shallow niches carved into the soil, each of which was filled with something she couldn't identify at first. But as she advanced toward the flashlight, she could see more clearly that they were insects, earthworms, centipedes, ants, crickets, slugs, all dead and all sorted quite thoroughly into the separate cavities.

She had crossed half the distance to the light when something struck her in the shoulder.

It was a small stone, propelled with enough force to bring a cry of pain. Cherie staggered to one side, rubbed her shoulder and tried to spot the source of the attack. As far as she could tell, she was alone in the chamber.

Something moved behind, or rather within, the wall, something not seen, almost not heard, but definitely sensed. Cherie backed away cautiously, moving toward the flashlight.

Another small stone struck her on the left kneecap and she stumbled, skinning both palms as she broke her fall. A third whistled past the side of her head and ricocheted off the far wall. Cherie rolled away, banging her already wounded knee painfully in the process. But her roll was toward the flashlight and a second later she was holding it in one hand.

From the opposite wall, something was coming out of the warren of small tunnels, a tenuous form that unfolded as it emerged into the semblance of a small child. It had a head and arms and legs, but the limbs weren't quite right, there were curves rather than joints and the head had just the suggestion of a face.

It stood watching her, motionless at first, then raised one serpentine arm to point to a feature of the chamber Cherie hadn't noticed before. Along one side wall, portions of the floor had been scooped out to create a concavity similar to those that had been filled with the corpses of insects. But this was much larger, large enough to accommodate a human body.

And the face that wasn't really a face smiled. Inhuman as it might be, the smile was a familiar one, the humorless grimace her father affected when he was using a belt or his hands or a length of knotted rope to instill what he called "discipline" in his daughter.

That's when she remembered the knife.

It wasn't much of a weapon, but it was the best thing she had. She stood slowly, favoring the injured knee even though the pain was already beginning to fade. As she did so, the tenuous apparition advanced toward her, incredibly menacing

even though it seemed insubstantial, little more than a trick of the light. The knife seemed to slip into her hand of its own volition and she cocked her arm and tossed it overhead, watched it tumble end over end, right into...and through...the figure's chest.

Something screamed soundlessly inside her head and the creature, whatever it was, seemed to shatter, each of its limbs seeking refuge in a separate crawlspace. It was still there though, on both sides now; she could hear it moving behind the walls.

She limped across the chamber and retrieved the knife before climbing into the exit tunnel while behind her something chattered in silent rage.

Cherie's fatigue was washed away by a flood of adrenaline and she moved steadily, not even pausing for breath when she reached the chamber with the shattered pot, then headfirst back into the tunnels. She had to reverse herself at the fork and wriggle back feet first, but she did so without hesitation, rarely even using the flashlight. The terror behind her was worse than anything the dark might conceal.

Or so she thought.

Then the larger junction where she was able to sit up, flex her aching muscles. It should be easy from here, along the horizontal passage, then up to the top. Once she thought she heard something moving back the way she had come, faint, furtive. There was no question of it being an animal; she knew now that there were only two living things in these tunnels.

Assuming the creature was a living thing.

Her fear diminished as she crawled forward, but the tunnel seemed much longer than when she had entered. At the bottom of a shallow trough, something soft moved under her hand and she almost cried out before realizing what it was. Her discarded sweater. She knew where she was now; in a few minutes, she should be on the surface.

And she would have been if the ground above hadn't suddenly given way.

She wasn't buried exactly; in fact, very little dirt fell, just enough to make it difficult to move her arms and legs. But a very large chunk of stone had shifted, dropped lower, just low enough that no matter what she did, she could move neither forward nor back.

It took Cherie a while to figure that out though, and only her physical weakness prevented her from flailing about in frustrated rage. But calm returned as she realized that at the worst, she simply had to wait until morning. When the archaeologists returned, she could call to them, and they'd get her out, one way or another. They wouldn't be happy to find her there, but that's life, right?

Cherie arranged the bundled sweater under her head and decided to try to get some sleep. She might have succeeded if it hadn't been for a sudden loud noise in the distance, unrecognizable at first, then quite clear. Thunder. The rain came a few minutes later.

It was a pretty heavy downpour. The dry walls of the tunnel absorbed the water at first, but it came too fast, began to reach the floor of the first level in a trickle at first, then a

steady stream. Cherie wasn't alarmed at first, not until she realized her hair was soaked and her left cheek was lying in a pool of water.

The dampness spread down her body, the water backing up from the fallen earth. Cherie used the flashlight to examine the problem, then carefully used her hands and feet to dig a narrow channel. By the time she was successful, her neck was stiff from holding her head above the rising water.

But when she finally broke through, the level dropped with astonishing speed, and she let her head fall back into the mud with a sigh of relief, listening to the tiny sounds of running water, surprised at how wonderful they sounded.

Cherie began to laugh then, realized it was the beginning of hysteria, but couldn't do anything about it. The tension had to be released somehow. In the morning she'd be rescued, pulled loose like an impediment in a drainpipe, made to look a fool, and probably sent back to her father besides. And it had all been for nothing.

"Damn it all!" She shouted at last, finally returning to something like calm.

The sound of running water had changed somehow, but she didn't realize what was going on until the pooled water climbed up past her ears. With the flashlight, she could just make out the low earthen barrier that had been pushed into place just below her feet, just out of reach.

And then came the belated, almost echo once more.

"Dam it all," it said.

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RETURN

By Brooks Caruthers

TRICOLOR VIDEO LIGHT flickered in tandem with stage lights pulsing through ancient gels of cyan and magenta. Roger grinned over his keyboards and tried not to take the whole thing too seriously. His left hand kept an ostinato of dissonant notes chugging in the engine of the Sordid Chums' music. "The Steam Powered Boy." Mechanical. Dancers on the floor jerked while videos of nude women beamed down on them from the ceiling. Roger felt mechanical. He wiped sweat from his forehead with his right hand and then threw another of his brainy electronic doodles into the mix. His wife, Miriam, was thrashing her guitar while Bobby slapped his bass and Allison pounded the skins. Roger's digital noises were out of place here...

Nah, that was bullshit. The worms were the reason. The worms held him back. How could he possibly play the crazy, scorching music of his past, the music of Synapse, while the worms under his skin pumped their calming chemicals into his bloodstream, eating and excreting into his veins, keeping him "sane".

Miriam signaled with her guitar and the band shifted into "Dunagin's Folly." All their old fans cheered wildly, sweltering together in the small Austin dance club, kicking the 'Chums off on the tour for their first album.

Dunagin lies. Dunagin leaves. Roger loved this song. Dunagin flies. Dunagin flees. Silly, but well-timed, it had some of the old Synapse magic. Roger called up patch 72: a low, throbbing hum. Allison clicked the sides of her drum with one hand and played maracas with the other. Bobby's bass went "splat splotch" right into the stomach.

Bobby's girlfriend, Kathy, was out on the floor, dancing to his bass line. Video light caught special triangular patches on her retro-punk skirt and made them shimmer with rippling moiré patterns. The mother of pearl streak in Kathy's long and wavy dark hair lured Roger's eyes to her and her kinetic hip-sway held them. Cold contact eyes caught his stare and she smiled back.

Roger overlaid his synth-hum with a crazy network of chirps, rasps, and buzzes that transformed the club into a midnight swampland of rhythmic insects. Miriam grinned at him and jangled a floating guitar chord, singing, "Dunagin has fled again/Dunagin is through," (Her voice clear and smooth, a mantra, a crystal caress) "Dunagin returns/Dunagin..." (Everything cuts out except the maracas) "...begins again."

The applause was louder than the roar of conversation. It was a good show. Miriam had that glow about her that reminded Roger of their old college days when they first met. She smiled at the audience. "Thanks. We gotta go now. Buy the album. It's great."

"We can fly, Miriam," said Daddy, leading her onto the rooftop. "I've leaned how. It's easy!" He held out his hand, and in her dreams Miriam took it without hesitation and they stepped together out into space. Mother was screaming hysterically out the window for them to return, but as they flew into the countryside her shouts faded and shrunk into a tiny whine from an AM radio, into a buzzing mosquito, into nothing at all.

Flying! Soaring into the air. Diving down to skim the ground. While Daddy floated peacefully on his back, Miriam did tricks for him, loops and somersaults. Then he drifted into the trees and had to scramble madly to free himself from the branches and Miriam laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks. "What are you laughing at?" he asked, smiling. "Better not let the tickle monster hear you!"

"No!" she giggled.

"Too late! Here he comes!" and the tickle monster chased her all over the sky. "Gotcha!"

They flew up into the kingdom of the clouds--clouds golden with sunlight; clouds dark with thunder; hard white clouds. (One cloud broke free from the pack. It moved closer, stalking....)

Miriam's father drifted backwards, watching her and smiling. He looked so happy. He was falling slowly towards a white cloud that roiled like an angry cotton ball. He stretched out his arms to Miriam. "Come give me a hug!"

Just as Miriam was about to fly into her father's arms, the cloud began to hiss, rainbows rippling across its surface. Miriam jerked back. "Daddy! Look out!"

Her father hit the cloud with a soft crunch and a gasp that sounded like *oh* as the back of his head shattered and his body twisted and doubled over and *oh* as his arms drifted back up to reach for Miriam and *oh* as the cloud began to wrap soft white tendrils around him and its mist turned a rosy pink where it mixed with his blood *oh* he was enveloped; he sank in; his reaching arms were the last to disappear.

Then Miriam was on the roof again, crying into her mother's white cloth chest, because of course she'd never really taken Daddy's hand and he'd jumped into space all alone and now he lay broken on the patio below.

Soft white cloth, wet with tears...

...Miriam's pillow was soaked. She sighed and pulled it down from her face. Where was the damn kleenex? She got out of bed, still clutching the pillow, leaving Roger to snore on, oblivious.

In the bathroom she saw her mother reflected in the cabinet mirror. Always so quiet and sad, just trying to hold things together while her husband chased another crazy windmill, trying to protect a daughter that followed Daddy everywhere, trying to cope with the unexpected emptiness of her husband's death...Miriam straightened her shoulders and brushed her hair out of her eyes. The illusion faded and she saw her own reflection once more. She walked to the kitchen with the pillow still dangling under one arm.

Roger padded in as she poured herself a glass of milk. "Had that dream again?"

She nodded.

He rubbed the back of her neck. "Would it help to talk

about it?" She swirled her milk and gazed at the whirlpool. "It's the same old thing."

He let his hand drop. She turned to look at him. "It's okay," she said, touching his cheek with her fingertips. "I just need to sit and think awhile. Try to get some sleep. We've got a long haul tomorrow."

He nodded. "Kathy said she'd swing by at about eight."

Miriam looked down at her glass again. "Mmm. I wish Bobby didn't have to bring her along. I mean, she's been real helpful and all but..."

"Helpful? Hell, she's got a place for us to stay at each gig and done most of the organizational type stuff. She's been more useful than our so-called 'management' has been. We should give her a percentage."

Miriam found herself mumbling. "Well hell, she's only doing it 'cause she's interested in you." She bit her tongue. "Whaaa--?" Roger looked bewildered.

"I'm sorry. I don't know where that came from. Why don't you go back to bed. I'll be there in a little bit."

Roger left, absently stroking the places on his lower arms where his bio-regs had been implanted. The worms kept him so calm, so gentle. *I can lean on him now, for a change.* He wrote *me to*. She sighed. *I'm not sure I know how.*

She wandered into the den, where at last she set down her pillow and picked up her guitar and tried to work things out.

ROGER WATCHED KATHY drive the van. Even though she was just wearing a t-shirt and blue jeans, she still gave the impression of someone wearing an impeccably chosen costume. Her face had just the right light touch of makeup. Her clothes had a close glove fit. Bracelets jangled as she turned a corner. Earrings shook under long, lustrous dark hair with its streak of pearl. She shot a glance at Roger, and he saw twin reflections of his face in her metallic gold contacts.

"Good news everybody!" Kathy projected her voice so that it could be heard over the sound of the engine. "We've got free accommodations for Little Rock and Atlanta. In Little Rock we'll be staying with Allison's parents--"

"Yay for Allison!" said Bobby. "Yay for her parents!"

"Yaaaaaay!" said everyone.

"You haven't met my parents yet," muttered Allison.

"--and in Atlanta," Kathy continued, "we'll be staying with an old friend of mine."

"It's not that Taylor guy, is it?" asked Bobby.

"Of course it is. Who'd you think it would be?"

"You know him?" Miriam asked Bobby.

"I've met him a few times. Enough to know that he's a fuckin' loon."

"Be nice Bobby," said Kathy. "He's an old friend of mine, a med student, and he's very smart."

"Was a med student, you mean. Now he does that holistic health stuff."

"He's also giving us a free place to spend the night."

"Well...yeah..."

"Hey," said Allison. "Don't knock it if it's free."

They rode the van up old Interstate 35, past Bobtown and Bruceville towards Dallas. Roger rode sat in the front passenger seat and idly wondered how many of the little towns indicated by small, green exit signs were now ghost towns...

"When are y'all gonna cover some old Synapse songs," asked Kathy. "That was one of my favorite bands, you know."

"Well, we've tried 'The God of White Mice' a few times, but it never sounds too good."

"That's one of my favorites! Come on, try it again, huh, huh, will ya?"

God. That smile. "Well...maybe we will..."

"Good. I like the Sordid Chums a lot, hell, I'm dating Bobby, but Synapse...hell, I wish y'all hadn't broken up."

"Yeah. Sometimes I do to, but I was crazy then, you know..." Roger twirled his finger next to his temple. "I'm just glad Miriam stuck with me through all that shit. She's just as responsible for my sanity as the bio-regs."

"Bio-regs. Bobby told me you call them your 'worms'."

"Well, they look like worms. I think the gene techs may have even used parasitic worms as a starting point. But they used some of my DNA as well. They're really just a new form of human organ. The first ones were developed to produce insulin for diabetics. Mine were developed to secrete just enough phenothiazines into my bloodstream to keep me stable. They're smart little buggers. They give me much lower dosage of drug than I'd get if I had to take pills everyday, but when I'm under stress they secrete more. I call them worms, but it's an affectionate term."

"Mmmm. I respect worms. They've been around a lot longer than humans. Did you know some witches had worms as familiars?"

"No. I thought they used cats."

"You don't choose your familiar. Your familiar chooses you. I haven't found mine yet..."

"You a witch?"

"Well, not exactly. I use a few elements from the Craft and a few from Santaria and a few from OTO. A lot of stuff I just came up with myself. And Aunt Clare taught me a lot."

Roger failed to keep the skepticism out of his voice. "Oh yeah. Your aunt is Clare the Psychic, isn't she?"

"You bet she is. What, you don't think she's for real?"

"Well, uh, she's been in business for years, I guess she must know something..." Roger sank into a mumble. Thankfully, Kathy let the conversation drop.

They rode on. At Dallas they switched to I-30 and began to drive east, letting the city's broken glass towers sink behind them. Allison was driving. Roger stared out the window, daydreaming and mulling over Miriam's previous night remark about Kathy.

He looked back into the van. Miriam lay on her stomach, writing something on a legal pad. Bobby was sleeping in the back seat with Kathy cozily nestled under his right arm. Bobby's head was thrown back with his mouth wide open and he looked like a snoring corpse.

Roger realized that Kathy was watching him. She winked and shut her eyes once more.

LITTLE ROCK'S UNDERTURF club used to be a warehouse and the bright acoustics of the brick walls created a feedback nightmare. Miriam found herself stuck with all the logistics of where to put the drum set while the opening band played and where to park the van so it wouldn't get towed and how to communicate with a sound man who had drugged himself into speaking an alien language...She wondered where Kathy and all her supposedly excellent organizational skills had gotten off to.

At last they fixed it so Miriam could sing and hear herself through the monitor speakers without sending them into a banshee squall. The 'Chums jammed on "Self Conscious" for a minute or two and she released her frustration with a few of her favorite primal screams.

At last Miriam spotted Kathy. She was standing stock still at the back of the club, eyes closed, breathing deeply. Then she sprinkled a white powder on the floor. As Miriam watched, Kathy traced out a series of diagonal lines throughout the club with the powder, stopping at each time she changed directions for another moment of meditation.

Miriam lost her place in the music. She shifted into punk-freakout mode and Bobby, Roger and Allison all joined her for a moment of glorious noise.

"Sounds great," shouted Kathy. "I've empowered the club, so you'll be all right now. Anyone want a beer?"

"I'll take one," said Miriam. To Bobby she said, "What the fuck is she talking about?"

"Oh, hell, I guess she's protecting us from evil spirits or something. Just ignore her."

That night the evil spirits stayed away but a contingent of frat boys insisted on showing up to disrupt the show. When the 'Chums adamantly refused to play "Freebird", a fight broke out between the frat boys and art boys. The manager shut the show down and then insisted that he lost money on the gig and wouldn't be able to pay them. Allison made a point of breaking all the empty beer bottles she could find as they left.

STARS AND HEAT lightning. Roger sat alone on the porch. Allison's parents had gone to bed and most of the band had politely followed suit. (It'd been funny to see Allison become a paranoid teenager again. "Jeez, they're already asleep. Now please, don't make any noise at all oh god I didn't mean to drop that...") It was good to be alone for a moment, to let his thoughts meander.

"Y'all didn't do any Synapse songs tonight," Kathy sat down next to him. Tight white mini-dress with black geometrical shapes. Matching earrings. Scent of roses and long smooth legs.

Roger stared resolutely at the stars. "We only played five songs."

"I know. I'm just giving you a hard time. I guess if you're tired of those old songs you shouldn't have to play

them anymore."

Roger sighed. "I still like them. Hell, I wrote most of them, and I'm proud of that. But I was a different person then. Back then it was almost like I was a preacher, and those songs were my gospel. I had this sense that everything was connected, tightly, intimately, and I had to tell about it."

"And you don't believe that now?"

"I'd like to think so. But now it's just an abstraction."

Kathy took his hand. "No. You were right. I saw y'all perform when you came to Austin, years ago. You looked like you were on fire, and I could see the truth in your eyes. It's a truth I know." She stroked the inner surface of his lower arm. "Is this where the bio-reg is?"

"One of them." Roger held out his other wrist. "I've one for each arm."

"I can see them. It's like they're glowing." She stroked the other arm. Her rose scent rose into his brain and his head floated over his shoulders. "I sense a great power within them. They're ancient and waiting for release."

Roger pulled his arms away. "No, they're not. They were made just two years ago."

Kathy looked up. Heat lightning flickered golden in her eyes. "It doesn't matter how they were born. Their spirit is ancient, just as yours is, just as mine is. They're that part of you that holds you back."

The screen door opened. "Kathy, are you coming to bed?"

"In a minute, Bobby."

Roger excused himself and went up to the room where Miriam slept. He arms were wrapped around her pillow and she looked just like a little girl. Roger felt obscurely guilty, even though he hadn't done anything. He kissed her on the cheek. Without seeming to wake she let go of the pillow and wrapped her arms around him. He settled into a dreamless sleep.

LITTLE ROCK TO Memphis. Two hours on a flat road. Miriam drove. Making conversation was the only available entertainment, but the only one who felt like talking was Kathy, who went on and on about magic and psychics and herbs and holistic medicine and all her favorite music. Miriam nodded and smiled and drove. *After all, she is Bobby's girlfriend and she's really very nice and I'm just being stupid and jealous whenever she talks to Roger, childish really, I shouldn't be so protective...*

Kathy read her mind. "Miriam," (Those damn metallic contacts boring into her head,) "Miriam, I have no sexual interest in Roger. I know you've been thinking that, but it's not true."

"I never said--"

"I know, you're too polite."

Long road, flat farm land, and Kathy's gold eyes, "Roger and I are old souls. That's our connection. We're like brother and sister."

"Oh?" said Miriam. *I don't like the sound of this.*

"He has great potential. I just want him to achieve it."

Isn't that what you want?"

Miriam swerved just in time to avoid a pothole the size of Lake Erie. Tires screeched.

"Jesus! You falling asleep up there?" asked Allison.

"Just slalomming through the obstacle course here. I could use a break, though. Let's get some ethyl up here."

Miriam pulled into the Forrest City exit. Everyone got out used the facilities of an ancient, fly-infested truck stop. Miriam and Bobby were the first back in the van.

"You know Bobby," said Miriam. "Your girlfriend's a complete flake."

"Yeah, what can I say. I'm in love. But what's all this shit between her and Roger?"

"It's shit. Pure and simple. I'm worried about it."

Miriam stared out the windshield. Kathy stood on the concrete apron of the station, eyes closed, deep in meditation. A stiff wind blew her hair back in dramatic waves, and the sun caught the pearl streak in her hair and turned it into a river of rainbows.

CLUB CLIFTON WAS a suburban mall. There were no stores left, just broken escalators, empty, steel-shuttered display windows and a rank, untended fountain. The old muzak system played ambient dance music that echoed into a meaningless drone. It soon became obvious to Roger that the live music would also become an echoing, meaningless drone, but he liked the atmosphere of the place—it was like the ultimate party zone for people who'd spent most of their childhoods as mall rats.

Roger found himself watching Kathy. She stood out even amongst all the other exotic costumes and attitudes. She was sprinkling white powder again, (just salt—she'd made a point of showing it to him,) tracing lines up the escalators and across the balcony and down again by the fountain.

At last she came over to the table where the Sordid Chums sat. "Okay, I've finished empowering the club. Smell this." She crushed a round, brown leaf and waved it quickly past their noses. It smelled a bit like sage, only sharper. Allison sneezed.

Kathy left them to get a beer. "I don't need this shit," muttered Miriam. Roger laughed.

The first set went well, despite the strange acoustics. The mall seemed to help them along, once they adjusted their playing to it. No one danced until the sixth song, but when Miriam kicked off "Sally's Safari" a few brave souls ventured onto the dance floor, and soon they had a nice little crowd before them, jerking and swaying.

The second set got off to a misfire when Miriam broke a string right in the middle of "Dunagin's Folly", but soon

they were back on track. The neo-thrash of the song "Lifted" brought all the old punks out only the dance floor and they quickly formed a carousel, bumping together but avoiding direct collisions. (Most were too old for that.) At the end there were the usual shouted requests: "Freebird!" "Dead Dog!" "Born in the USA!" "Play something you know!"

"Synapse!" shouted Kathy. "Play 'God of White Mice'!"

"Yeah," shouted someone and about three guys stared chanting, "White Mice! White Mice! White Mice!"

Miriam looked at Roger. "Wanna try it?"

Roger shrugged. "Yeah, what the hell."

Allison kicked them off with a reggae beat. Clean and pure: drums, bass and staccato guitar in a minor key. Roger stepped up to the microphone and looked down at Kathy, who was leaning on the monitor speakers. She rolled her head while keeping her gaze fixed on him. She looked blitzed. Her right hand held up another one of those round leaves.

"I got a little out of sync," Roger sang, "With the way/that you feel." His voice quavered horribly. "My old needs

have come to me anew/'N so I'd like to make a deal." The worms tried to stabilize him. His voice got stronger. "You're looking at me with your cold steel eyes/You're doing/The same old thing." His gaze kept falling towards Kathy. "Once I gave up my soul to you/It's time to do that again." Kathy crushed the leaf. Chorus:

"Fucked up in the summertime."

"Frozen in the snow and ice."

"Jah Love's fine, and Jesus Christ,

"But I've decided to worship the God of White Mice."

The sage smell went straight to Roger's brain. Diagonal white lines flashed briefly on the floor, up the escalators, on the balconies. Roger reeled back to his keyboards, wanting to illustrate them with his synth. His eyes were fixed on Kathy, and he saw that she was dancing the lines. Her movements dictated his solo. His melodies choreographed her dance. Roger felt the old Synapse rush, the feeling of pure communication, as Miriam, Bobby and Allison formed a pyramid that would let him touch the sky.

The bridge of the song arrived. Roger hit patch 47, an automatic noise crescendo, and ran back to the microphone. Dramatic, stadium-rock chords replaced the reggae riffs.

"I've decided that the shocks are worth the climb." Roger leaned on the mic stand, his lips pressed against the microphone. "This crazy lightworld supercedes a stitch in time." The white lines flashed again, and Roger could feel their electricity surge through the salt in his blood. "Just one last pellet and I'll be fine for today." Roger loosened the mic stand and began to sink to his knees. "I'll listen carefully to all you have to say."

Diagonal white lines flashed briefly on the floor, up the escalators, on the balconies. Roger reeled back to his keyboards, wanting to illustrate them with his synth. His eyes were fixed on Kathy, and he saw that she was dancing the lines. Roger felt the old Synapse rush, the feeling of pure communication, as Miriam, Bobby and Allison formed a pyramid that would let him touch the sky.

He held up his arms for all to see. Chorus:

"Jah love's fine, and Jesus Christ,

"You came for me. I paid the price.

"Humid snowstorms and red-hot ice

"Confirm my impulse to worship the God of White mice."

The synth throbbed, louder and louder. Kathy reached up to Roger's arms. *"The God of White Mice.* The worms were agitated. The skin of his wrists rippled and pulsed. *"The God of White Mice."* Kathy touched the throbbing skin of his arms. A jolt of energy transfixed him like a lightning rod. *"The God of White Mice."*

The synth screamed and pounded; its noise filled the air with a power that remained even after Roger shut it off. The rest of the set was a blur of shining musical ratios and thunderous applause and brilliant white lines.

MIRIAM WAS DRENCHED with sweat and joy as the show ended. Roger was excited and wide eyed, grinning like a boy, irresistible. She gave him a big kiss right there on stage and they sat on the edge with arms intertwined, collecting compliments and looking like newlyweds. Bobby sold albums and Kathy virtually seduced a group of young, nerdy boys into buying Sordid Chums shirts. Then she talked one innocent young fan into letting them spend the night at his house.

Actually it was his parents' house, and in a nice neighborhood too, but Miriam made excuses and slept in the van anyway, with Roger. There they kissed and undressed and let their hands follow the familiar curves of their bodies, sweating and close, but before they merged Roger's touch began weaken, and his movements slowed.

"I'm sorry." His voice was slurred. His body shook, and his eyes were trying to roll back into his head, to roll him into sleep. She touched his cheek. Wet. With tears. "Fuckin' worms," he said. "It's the fuckin' worms." He slapped feebly at his wrists.

Miriam understood. The bio-regs had worked overtime counteracting the derangement of the concert. As his adrenalin faded the excess chemicals pulled him into unconsciousness.

"I love you." His voice was a croak, a whisper.

"It's all right Roger," she whispered back, kissing his tears. "I love you too. Sleep now. Sleep."

"mmmmrrr--" Roger faded out.

Miriam masturbated to a climax and then lay staring at the dark roof of the van. The block shapes of the amplifiers loomed over her. It took long hours of thinking, daydreaming, and letting her mind float around irrelevancies before she finally fell asleep.

IT WAS A long trip to Atlanta. Roger slept most of the way. The skin on the underside of his wrists was sore and covered with a spiderwork tapestry of red lines.

Kathy was fascinated. "What happened?"

"Mmmm...My implants got really agitated last night.

Must've broken a few capillaries."

Kathy stroked the sore places with cool and soothing

fingers. "You fought them well last night. But they will always win."

Her cool touch stroked his mind into sleep again. Her voice whispered. "Such powerful creatures. So misused. They could give one great power. But they're just used to enslave you."

Rumble of tires. Drone. Dream of Kathy in bed with him, her cunt pulling sweetly at his arms. When Roger came back Miriam and Kathy were talking about him. He left his eyes shut and listened.

"Your leaf trick was good psychology," said Miriam. "I didn't expect it to work. I was surprised when it did."

Kathy's voice was nonchalant. "The energy was in the salt crystals, maximized by the pattern I laid them in. The leaf just triggered the energy release and allowed y'all to tune in with it."

"Uh-huh. I think it would be more accurate to say that you planted a suggestion in our minds which you associated with the very distinctive smell of the leaf. When you released the smell the second time, it triggered the suggestion...particularly with Roger."

"You can use any explanation you want. Six of one, half a dozen of the other. But Roger can feel it. He can tune into energy flows very well. He's just been suppressing it."

Roger felt Miriam's exasperated sigh like a lukewarm, muggy towel. "Look, that's a very dangerous outlook for Roger. It's...it's too close to sort of delusions he was having when Synapse broke up. I don't know, maybe all this sounds romantic to you but...hell, it was romantic for a bit. There we were, just out of college, a hot new band that was actually beating the odds and beginning to catch on. Touring all the time. It was also stressful, particularly for Roger since he was more or less the leader of the band. He started having these hallucinations. To him they were like spiritual visions, and he'd preach them while we played and everyone thought they were really cool, but...but I was with Roger all the time and he got to where he just couldn't turn off and it was terrifying. He'd start ranting in these nonsense syllables, like he was speaking in tongues. He'd get so upset when I couldn't understand him, and he'd start crying. Finally the rest of the band couldn't deal with it anymore. Synapse broke up and so did Roger. The shrinks said that the tendency for schizophrenia was always there and this just brought it out...Anyway, his mother freaked. She blamed herself for not giving him enough 'quality time' and she went broke buying him the bio-reg implants. They *do* help keep him stable, and I've done all I can to strengthen his sense of reality, but it's always going to be like he's standing up on a chair that you can kick out from underneath him."

Kathy's voice was higher than Miriam's. The two were singing a duet about him. "I understand what you're saying. Power without control is extremely dangerous. I know that personally." When I was a kid I cast a spell to make my parents go away...and it worked! They flew away and never came back. Their plane turned into a fireball, and I felt the flash and the heat at the exact moment they died. I lived with

my aunt after that and she taught me how to control my power...and I've been learning ever since. My parents died so that I could learn it. That's a heavy thing. So I understand control."

"Understand? You haven't even been listening to what I've been saying!"

"I understand that you've given Roger *too much* control. It's stifling him. You can see it in his eyes. He needs freedom. You should be helping him to fight the worms instead of fuckin' cooperating with them."

Drone of tires. Miriam's voice, low and measured. "No. You're wrong. You're not understanding me. So listen." Miriam in a dream, standing with her guitar, singing, "Stay away from my husband. Don't even talk to him." Kathy dancing around like a bird. "But Miriam--" The two seem opposed, but it's all the same song. "Stay away Kathy. I know you've helped us out a lot. Just stick with Bobby and stay out of my way. That's how you can help us now." The song comes to a false ending. Kathy looks at Roger. He sees himself gold in her eyes. "Okay."

By the time they reached Atlanta, Roger was wide awake and driving. It'd been years since he'd visited Atlanta, but he found his way Kathy's friend's house without even having to ask. It was easy. Everything was easy. Driving was easy. Stopping was easy. Meeting Kathy's friend, Taylor, was easy. Roger was following the flow of an unseen line of force and it was as easy and fun as letting a bicycle coast downhill.

THE STIM CLUB was small and cramped. It used to be a shoe store. The size of the crowd was underwhelming. Miriam settled back into her rhythm guitarist mode. She played the chords and sang the songs and just tried to hold everything together while Bobby, Allison and Roger vamped up their parts in a vain attempt to inject life into the shoebox club.

Roger's playing was very experimental that night. Sometimes it sounded great and Miriam tried to take mental notes on what he was doing that made the old songs suddenly fresh and new. At other times he played like he was in another room, in another band.

Kathy danced around, moving in special patterns, casting significant glances towards the stage. She did her leaf trick again, but it had no effect on Miriam. All she felt was fatigue.

After the show the club manager told them that the crowd had been smaller than usual and...what it boiled down to was: Forty dollars. Take it or leave it.

Kathy spent a lot of time talking quietly to her friend, Taylor. Taylor was about six feet tall, clean-shaven with long hair--he cultivated a sort of well-to-do guru look. He lived in one large house crowded with bric-a-brac. Unorganized bookshelves held everything from *Grey's Anatomy* to Alistair Crowley's *The Book of Thoth*.

Both at home and at the Stim Club, Taylor and Kathy kept stealing glances at Roger as they talked. Miriam tried to ignore them--as long as they kept their distance--but it irritated her, and apparently it irritated Bobby even more. He and Kathy fought after the show, and he ended up sleeping in

the van.

Miriam and Roger bedded down in the room of Taylor's absent roommate, leaving Allison in the den downstairs watching old industrial music videos. Miriam felt dead. She saw her mother in the mirror again and stared for a long time into her tired eyes.

Her sleep was dreamless.

THREE AM. ROGER got up to piss. When he finished he heard voices down the hall. He followed them to a book-laden, candlelit room furnished with a sofa, chairs, and a coffee table. Kathy and Taylor looked up as he entered. They seemed to be expecting him. Kathy sat on the sofa. Taylor sat in a chair at the end of the coffee table. He was sterilizing scalpel and needles.

"Right on time," said Kathy. She turned to Taylor, smiling. "See. I didn't even have to leave the room."

"Sit down please, Roger," said Taylor, indicated the side of the sofa nearest the chair. "Kathy has explained to me that you want your bio-regs removed. Is this true?"

Lines of force had brought him here. No doctor would remove the worms, but Taylor could. *I should say no. That's the rational answer.* The worms writhed, sliding slick and hungry under his skin...

"Yes," he said.

Taylor's scalpel flashed gold in the candlefire, like Kathy's eyes. "There will be pain," he said. "Kathy will help you to deal with it. You must also help her."

The cold touch of alcohol tightened his skin, readying it for touch of the blade. Kathy sat with her arms around him, holding his right hand and his right elbow. Taylor positioned Roger's arm over a water-filled aluminum tray.

It was so easy, the way the knife sliced his flesh. Kathy's gold warmth flowed through his arm and the pain was a distant, abstract thing. There was less blood than Roger thought there would be. The first few drops formed brief, beautiful red flowers in the water of the tray.

The frantic motions of the worm pushed the slit open. The bio-reg was white and muscular, clamped parallel to a large vein, sucking blood in the raw meat raw meat wonder of Roger's arm. Taylor used two pairs of forceps to disengage each end of bio-reg from the vein. Tricky and slippery, the worm at last landed in the tray with a splash. It curled around--sharp rimmed orifices at each end searching for something to grasp onto.

Kathy's left hand left Roger's arm so she could daub at the wound with gauze. Taylor tied off the damaged vein and sutured up the cut. The pain drew nearer, a red ache pushed closer and closer by each jab of the needle.

The bio-reg in the tray slowly ceased writhing. Its orifices flexed weakly, still searching for something to grasp onto. Kathy stared at the worm with tears in her eyes. "It's dying."

The second cut was more immediate, an intimate razor slicing down. The worm in Roger's left wrist was pumping frantically, its white body rippling in waves. "Hurry," said Kathy. Splash went the second worm. It groped blindly until

it found the first and began to clamp onto it.

"No!" said Kathy. She grabbed a scalpel and began to cut her left arm.

"Kathy! No!" Taylor reached out to grab her, but she flashed the scalpel at him. "Sew him up."

Kathy made her first cut successfully, and she pulled the skin apart and dropped the first worm into the slit, where it straightened out alongside a vein and clamped down. Taylor tried to speed up his suturing, sewing up Roger like a cheap, burlap bag. "Kathy, those weren't made for you. They'll kill you." Roger analyzed the pattern of needle jabs and their relation to the rising tide of pain.

"They won't kill me. They know me." Kathy made the second cut with her wounded arm, a clumsy ragged slice that quickly covered her right arm in blood. The second worm wriggled greedily in the blood-filled cut, swelling in size.

Taylor hastily knotted Roger's last suture. Roger was nauseous and swimming in pain. Kathy's voice: "Don't do that. Just sew me up." Eyes fire gold, sweat-skin flesh-gold, mother-of-pearl ripping red gold. Roger lay back on the couch, sweating and counting the hourglass dripping of Kathy's blood on the carpet, ticking away the seconds of each impeccably logical minute. Kathy's voice sang in a universe of pain. "I feel their touch on my mind now, so cool, sweet. If only I could show you. They have such power, Taylor. We can work miracles now."

Roger's arms burned with holy fire. Everything was red and gold and beautiful. Deep shouts echoed across this cosmos. Bobby's voice. Cosmic rage. "Goddamgoddam son of a bitch what did you do to her?" Crashes and thuds and Taylor sobbing, "At least let me finish, please let me finish!" and Kathy was making a keening sound with air whistling past her clenched teeth, "eccccah eccccah"

Roger opened his eyes. He saw Miriam standing in the doorway. He smiled. "Miriam. I'm free!"

MIRIAM HAD to do the rest, had to calm down Bobby and get Taylor to finish stitching up Kathy's arms and get them all to a hospital. The hospital wouldn't take them because they had no insurance, but while they were there they met an orderly who'd seen them at the Stim Club and he gave them the address of a underground clinic. "They're good people there. They used to be real doctors and everything." Miriam bundled everyone back into the van and as the sun began to rise she finally found the featureless storefront where the doc agreed to check over the stitches for fifty dollars, cash.

She felt nothing. Someone had taken the switch in her labeled "emotion" and turned it off.

Kathy kept drifting in and out of consciousness, but when the doc tried to look at her wrists she snapped awake and clutched her arms to her chest, "No! They're mine!"

"I just want to check out the sutures."

"No!"

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"They're mine!"

"I'm not going to take anything away from you."

"No!"

Kathy had lost one of her contacts. The eye beneath was brown. Simple brown. "No!" A child's eye, rolling in panic. "NO!" Her mother-of-pearl streak rippled with rainbows. "Nonononono!" She passed out again. Miriam almost felt sympathy then.

Roger paced the floor. "We need to go on to Athens. I know we can make some money there."

"I'm not playing," said Bobby. "I've got to stay with Kathy. But if we can ride with you, at least we can get out of this fuckin' town."

"No problem. We'll get John Hilliard to play with us. He still lives in Athens. It can be like a Synapse reunion. People'd go apeshit. I've got ideas now. Perfect ideas for a new Synapse show."

Miriam looked at Allison. "What do you want to do?"

Allison shrugged. "I'll go wherever y'all go. Don't really have a choice. Don't really care."

"You'll care," said Roger. "You'll care when you hear the music."

Miriam watched him pace. Even after the night's trauma, he was humming like a top. For the past half hour she'd been trying to convince him to go back to Austin. Now she didn't know anymore. His eyes danced. He was smiling. He looked like he did when Synapse started, back in the old college days of love and music.

Roger held out his hands to her. "Miriam, I know things look bad, now, but this can work!" *Daddy's voice at the edge of the rooftop. "We can fly, Miriam!"* "I can feel it!" *I know how* "Please try with me." *It's easy!* "I need you. Please."

Feeling a million years old, Miriam reached out to take his hands.

HOT STAGE AND big crowd. Synapse reunion. They'd only had one rehearsal, but it was enough. Roger told Allison to shift beats at random, that they would make it work, and work it did, beautifully, sh-bah. The music went out, sound vibrations agitating the inert heat energy of the club into shimmering auroras following curved lines of force, lines flowing from the passive, chair-sitting audience to the active crowd that stood up front with attention-rapt eyes. Roger recognized some faces from the days of Synapse past. He grinned Joe Hilliard, and Joe slid his fingers up his fretless bass in response with a sound like a musical saw. Go-who-ah! Yeah! The band formed a matrix. Allison Roger Miriam Joe, even Bobby, who was out in the van with Kathy—even though they weren't playing, Roger could feel them as the outside element, the unheard voice, the song unsung.

Synth-throb, back beat, slidy-slidy bass. The eyes of the loudspeakers approved, crinkling merrily. "Seeyateh!" sang Roger, "Seeyateh! Seeyateh! Say tow row loblin!" The code of life. Ha. His heart ached happily. He watched Miriam play. Her head hung low, hair shrouding her face. So beautiful! Rhythm guitar—her strumming channeled all the song's energy into reasonable proportions. She was the explicit unity of the music.

RETURN

Now Bobby was in the room, in the crowd, looking desperate, the desperation of life. Roger watched Bobby search the crowd and outlined his path with a keyboard line, leading up on stage. "I need a doctor," sang Bobby, singing like others talk, shout, plead for life. "Can one of you get a doctor here?" This was the resolution of the song, the outside element comes in, the unheard voice at last audible. "Or even a phone!" The unsung song revealed. "Please!" Lines of force formed a vortex around his desperation. Allison's frenetic drumming thrashed it into a hurricane. "An ambulance. Please! I think she's dying! Please help her! She's dying!" (Kathy a flickering candle in the van, blown by the hurricane. Time to end the song, before she blew out.)

Roger signaled the band, but then the candle flickered out and Roger felt it like a spasm in his chest, and he knew Miriam felt it and Bobby felt it, and Joe and Allison felt it; Kathy was gone, just like that, and everyone there felt it.

They all stopped playing at once, leaving only Miriam's ringing minor chord.

There was polite applause.

OUT FROM YE SHADOWS (Continued from p. 5)

Kurt Newton
Brooklyn, CT

DEATHREALM HAS GROWN exponentially in both presentation and content between issue # 18 and 20. I just read #20, and all I can say is William Trotter. When I read the issue, I started with the shorter stories first--and was somewhat disappointed early on--but stuck it out, saving *The Siren of Swanquarter* for last. I've read a lot of horror magazines in the past couple of years, and *The Siren of Swanquarter* has got to be one of the best stories I've read in that time. If I had a DEATHREALM Award ballot in my hand, I'd nominate it right here and now. But I guess I'll have to wait till #21 arrives. My other favorites from #20 were *House Dogs* by Mark Rich, and *The Diabolist* by William Bowers. Also, the cover art by Harry Fassel was extremely disturbing.

Jeff Williams
Winston-Salem, NC

I WAS VERY impressed with William Trotter's megadose of macabre, *The Siren of Swanquarter*. The story had such frightening realism and depth, that I hated that it ended so soon even though it was a longer piece.

I do have one thing that has been pestering me about this story. It may be the devious mind of the writer or maybe just coincidence. I don't know, but I have discovered profound correspondences between this story and the life of Elvis. The whole description of the Estate sounded just like a brochure I got while visiting Graceland. The description of the train in the story, I believe, was a metaphor for the Cadillacs that Elvis drove. Also, the Major had lost his left hand only

leaving his right; wasn't Elvis right handed? The real scary thing is that the wedding vows between Elvis and Priscilla ended with 'till death do us part' and there was to be a 'death' of the Major before the wedding could take place. One last sick note, the name of the woman that the Major was going to marry was AnneMarie while the name of Elvis's DAUGHTER is Lisa Marie.

I just can't stomach anymore.

Terry Campbell
Mesquite, TX

I ENJOYED #20. Harry Fassel's stunning cover gets things off to a good start. How does he do it? *The Siren of Swanquarter* was excellent (I love Civil War stories), though I thought it could've been shorter without hurting anything. Also, *The Diabolist* is another good historical piece. A chilling end. But my favorite piece was Mark Rich's *House Dogs*. Highly original and just plain weird. The image of the naked kittens was cool. Kinda makes you wonder if Lenny Bruce had house dogs. I liked Gerberding and Koszowski's art, as well as Malak's. Also, I think the DEATHREALM Awards is a great idea. We need more awards like the Stokers that recognize the small press, since most of the stuff in the small press is better than what you see in the "pro" magazines. Whoops, did I say that?

Keep up the good work. I'm looking forward to #21.

Augie Wiedemann
Kingston, NY

ATTORNEYS REPRESENTING HARRY Fassel and myself have finally reached agreement regarding Harry's responsibility for the cost of trauma therapy now necessary for my daughter's recovery after her accidentally viewing the horrific cover of DEATHREALM #20 and withdrawing into a severe catatonic state (in all probability, Harry will be unable to afford NECON this year).

I found William Trotter's *The Siren of Swanquarter* rich in atmosphere; easily one of the best pieces of fiction you've ever published. Also liked William Bower's *The Diabolist* and felt that Rodger Gerberding's accompanying illustration offered a beautiful example of this artist's fantastic expertise with pen & ink.

IN THE NEXT DEATHREALM:

Rick Hautala * Brian McNaughton
Kiel Stuart * Ian McDowell
Simon McCullough * Don Webb

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"...Like wild honey found in the heart of a wall."

—Oliver Onions
HONEY IN THE WALL

WELL, I'M NOT too old a dog to learn new tricks. Exploring, as I do from time to time, some of the older books in my personal collection, I recently stumbled across **THE COLLECTED GHOST STORIES OF OLIVER ONIONS** (Ivor Nicholson & Watson, London, 1935) and, with some excitement, discovered some really special things. Many of you will have heard of O. Onions (1873-1961), a writer born in Bradford, Yorkshire, whose two stories, *The Rosewood Door* and *The Beckoning Fair One*, are often anthologised: two masterpieces of the macabre. Yet, the trove is deeper, the treasure richer, as one delves into his lesser known works. They touch on preoccupations of mine regarding ambivalent existences and dimmer-switch identities. The style, too, is a deliciously woven tapestry of clause and sub-clause, beating Henry James at his own game. And the aftertaste...is, well, sweeter than honey yet black-peppered with other concerns that will stay with you within daylight as well as night--and during those dimnesses between. I genuinely believe I have found for myself a writer to rank alongside the great Robert Aickman. Why hasn't anyone told me before?

A British novel has emerged from a quality Small Press publisher (Barrington Books) since I last extended my Tentacles. This is **COUNTERPARTS** by Nicholas Royle, a well respected writer of Horror and Magic Realism, one whom you may have seen in **YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES** and elsewhere. Nick is also editor of the award-winning **DARKLANDS** anthologies, originally published by himself at Egerton Press and, now, picked up by New English Library. **COUNTERPARTS** was a wonderful reading experience for me, which during moments of the sweetest synchronous serendipity, echoed my own concurrent reading of Oliver Onions. By chance, Nick expands upon Onions' tantalising themes of crossed personality and involuted

individuality, together with Nick's own disturbing treatment of body mutilation, plus the vibrant historical immediacy of the novel's European venues. Read it!

I mentioned the UK banning of **CLOCKWORK ORANGE** in a previous column. You may be interested to know that, after a postponement, **CHANNEL 4 TV** were finally allowed to show a documentary about this film, including a few clips. There has subsequently been a furor regarding this landmark showing.

Not long ago, the British Fantasy Society held its yearly Fantasycon in Birmingham. This is an event I have attended for a number of years now and I was pleased to meet again Karl Edward Wagner--my co-columnist in **DEATHREALM**--and had an interesting chat with him about conger eels and other matters. Another pleasure was to hear a reading by Dennis Etchison of his story in the British anthology **DARK VOICES 5**. Mr. Etchison also held a session regarding HWA, a society which I didn't previously know was open to British writers. Dennis playfully complained at the banquet that the convention programme had more misspellings of his surname than he'd ever thought possible.

Of course, there was much drinking done at Fantasycon--which, from a previous column, you can imagine I found quite delightful! At one point there was a *huge* seated circle of us roisterers and I realized they were all British Small Press fanatics! It warmed the heart. (I haven't eaten hearts for a long time--and even if the hearts present were insufficiently warmed through by the fellow feeling--or by the heated discussion--they were probably more palatable than conger eel with or without onions!) A good event that convention. Congratulations to the organisers. Good to see some of you there, too.

Well, nothing about vampires this time...except, perhaps to say they'd eat their hearts out to have innards.

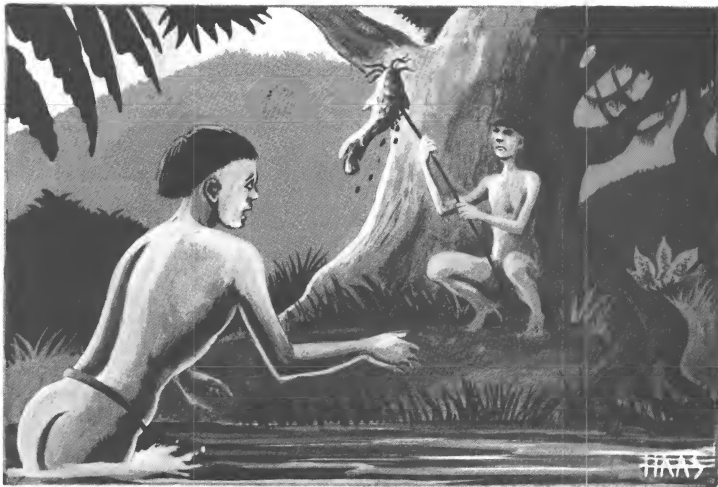
"There is no dream that has not been dreamed before."

—Oliver Onions
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BLOOD Brothers

By Jim Austin

Kenge opened his eyes and stared into a crosshatch of woven banana leaves. He listened to the familiar chirping of a spotted gecko guarding his territory from an intruder. He's young thought Kenge and he will never get old because the intruder was a bui-bui, one of several large spiders living a predatory life among the leaves. The gecko advanced on the spider who reared back on her rear legs and exposed two coal black fangs the length of a man's thumbnail. A darting lunge by the suicidal gecko must have seemed slow motion to the spider who drove her two sabres deeply into the throat of the lizard and clutched it in a macabre embrace. The tail of the stricken gecko beat a futile tattoo against a ceiling beam.... a tiny gargle and then death. Immediately buccal fluid flowed from glands near the mandibles of the arthropod dissolving the tender flesh of the reptile prior to sucking it into her mouth.

Kenge rose from his palette of woven immature bamboo and strode noiselessly across the cool earthen floor of his father's hut. He glanced at the vacant palettes around him.

His mother and sister were up every morning before dawn to work in the gardens before the heat of the day became too intense. His father was no doubt in the long hut with the other men of the village chewing betel nut, preparing arrows and planning the hunt.

Kenge ducked out of the doorway and squinted into the morning sun. He had slept late. A blazing disk was burning the tops of the trees surrounding the village. Puffs of dust rose from the beaten ground with each step as Kenge crossed the open area in the middle of twenty or so thatched dwellings. He passed five screaming children playing *bopi*, a game whose rules were as complex as they were transitory. Possession of a fist-sized tuber was a primary objective. The outcome of the game was always the same; five or six chubby boys rolling over and over on the dusty ground. It's been many rains since I played that game thought Kenge. If he had thought a little harder he might have recalled a skirmish or two just a short time ago.

Kenge strolled to a stop beside an ancient woman who was squatting, kneading the contents of a large wooden mortar.

"I tasted some *mkati* yesterday but it was not sweet like yours, Wahabi". The old woman suppressed a grin and spoke without raising her head.

"Not so sweet as the words of a boy seeking a free meal *cuscus*," Her reference to him as "*cuscus*" a nocturnal possum moved Kenge to mock seriousness.

"Guard your words old one, tomorrow I will be a man and may not have time to taste your mkate." The boy's imperious tone made Wahabi glance at Kenge's newly acquired swatch of curly black hair arching over his uncircumcised penis.

"The elder must be very careful when he makes you a man cuscus. His eyes must be sharp and his hand steady to make the cuts in such a tiny *nyoka*. You better eat some mkate to make you brave." Wahabi's bony arm set a gourd containing sticky balls of dough in front of Kenge.

Kenge only smiled. He knew he was a favorite of Wahabi, a real privilege for she was the oldest inhabitant of the village and considered wise and very powerful. Kenge took no heed of her insults, his large frame and burgeoning young manhood belied his age and Wahabi's derisive comments.

Kenge smiled again thinking of the effect his soft-featured face and lithe young body was having on the young women of the village. Many were shy and afraid to meet his eyes, but Masisi was different. She had caressed his body and moaned for him to enter her on the cool high grass beside the river, but each time he had turned away. It was only with great difficulty that Kenge suppressed his desire. He knew that a child fathered by an uncircumcised boy would have no soul, it would have no courage or strength to hunt. A pariah, it would be like the hooded boatman who sail up and down the river, uncut towards content to fetch and carry for others to make their living. How he burned to complete what Masisi had kindled in him. Only at night did his dreams allow him the release that made the fire in his groin retreat.

He would marry Masisi that much was certain. His father had spoken to her family and only the ritual forestalled their joy. His life was about to begin and he was happy. He would present his parents with sons and through them strengthen his line.

Kenge popped a fragrant mkate ball into his mouth and flashed a smile at Wahabi. She watched as Kenge's supple form sprinted toward the bush and the river beyond.

Kenge hit the water's edge at full gallop, arched slightly and turned the motionless pool to chaos. He planned beneath the surface until his lungs ached for air. Oblivious, he angled down until he found the sandy bottom. Kenge somersaulted to his feet and launched himself to the surface. He swept the water from his eyes and was startled by a figure that had appeared on shore. A stark angular form was squatting, arms folded, dark sunken eyes locked on Kenge.

"Kenge sleeps like fat *tembo*. We should have left before this, our fish will be in the depths."

"Sorry Gunto, my mind is not on fishing." Kenge tried to recover his composure. Gunto sneered in annoyance displaying a crowded assortment of teeth set in bright red gums.

Kenge felt sorry for his friend. Gunto was older than Kenge, he had been ready for the previous *barcina*. Many said the raving sickness which lasted through the ceremony had been planned by Gunto who feared the pain of the ordeal. Kenge decided not to believe this, he could not imagine letting the brief sting of the knife stand in the way of man-

hood and rank within the tribe. What coward would wish to deny themselves the ultimate in pleasure which Kenge had approached so often with Masisi? This, however, was not a foregone conclusion for Gunto. In the past, the bolder girls made light of Gunto's cavernous form and disagreeable features. Gunto had silenced them by giving the main offender, Ootra, the evil eye, and calling on the spirits of the night forest to kill her. Two days hence, Ootra accompanied her sisters to the pool behind the village for a swim. Seconds after entering the cooling waters Ootra stiffened and let out a strangled shriek for help. By the time her sisters got her to shore she had bitten off her tongue and was convulsing. The screams brought Wahabi from the shadow of her hut where she was enduring the heat of the day. It took only an instant for the old woman to act. She instructed the sisters to pry apart Ootra's legs and without hesitation plunged two bony fingers deep into the girl's vagina. Wahabi probed and pushed for a moment then withdrew her hand and flung a bloody gout of flesh to the ground. There, squirming obscenely, was a "canero", a tiny relative of the catfish. The canero will swim up any orifice of the body and there extend a lethal pallisade of spines which exude a toxin producing unbelievable pain before it kills. The canero is the only vertebrate parasite on earth known to prey on humans. It is so rare that many of the villagers thought that its existence was the stuff of legend. Had Wahabi been present before the poison was fully released Ootra might have been saved. The red-streaked foam which now cascaded down the sides of her grotesquely contorted mouth indicated that death was inevitable. Wahabi reached up and tried to realign the girl's face into a form that her family might recognize, but it was useless, the features were engraved, a testament to Gunto's power.

Now the girls of the village feared Gunto and even the adults avoided him. They suspected he possessed the *dawa*, an ability to cast spells and cause injury to others. He did not confirm or deny these suspicions. Most thought it was best to stay clear of Gunto.

Kenge paid little attention to the rumors or the whispers behind their backs as he and Gunto walked through the village. They would often go on journeys upriver to spear the fish which wallowed in the littorals after daybreak. Sometimes they would lay out several salad vines in the water and crush them with rocks. The sap from these poisonous vines would seep into the slow moving water and stupefy the fish making them easy prey to their pronged fish-spears. It made Kenge feel good to be Gunto's only friend. He could put up with Gunto's snarls and bad temper, besides, wouldn't anyone be unhappy to be cursed as Gunto? Still, Gunto had been very difficult to tolerate lately.

"Let us go and find Masisi, Gunto. She will make us forget the fish."

"I have no wish to see a sow in rut." Gunto sneered.

"Stop it Gunto, I am to marry Masisi."

"Then you must wait in line for she needs every male in camp to satisfy her."

Anger flashed and Kenge lashed back, "Not every male

Gunto, there is one goat-faced boy who must be content to satisfy himself."

Veins stood out on Gunto's forehead, he stared, eyes bulging, fists clenched and white with fury.

"I'm sorry Gunto, but my heart cannot bear your words." Kenge shifted from one foot to another nervously. It was as though Kenge had not spoken so intense was Gunto's rage.

"Let us go and see what our traps have snared in the fast water Gunto. Bring your spear to protect us from *pukpak's* jaws."

Kenge knew that the crocodile would not venture into the fast waters. Perhaps though, his confidence in Gunto's ability with the spear would assuage his injured feelings.

Rather that follow the river which was old and coiled through the jungle in a meandering way, the boys struck out through the bush. A canopy of towering giants intermingled a hundred feet from the forest floor making a dark amphitheater, echoing even whispers. Bare brown feet sank in the moist humus, eyes alert for dusky vipers.

Kenge was energetic, puppy-like on the trek. He would run to a familiar tree and check on the long-eared fox bats hanging in a hollow waiting for darkness to emerge and gorge on fruit. With a stick he dug at the boles of trees searching for *itaba*, the tender sweet root so prized by his people. Gunto trudged, deep in his own thoughts, ignoring Kenge's whoops and entreaties.

They heard the swift current before any water could be seen, a constant din, a powerful presence. The roar sent shivers up Kenge's spine, not in anticipation of the fish in his weirs but from being near the heart of the river god, the most powerful force on earth. Its swift current swept fish into the traps and kept the *pukpak* on the its banks.

The boom of the river increased its throbbing beat, barely muffled by the foliage along its banks. Once through the brush the boys faced a writhing maelstrom of furious whitewater, relentless and dangerous.

"We've come too far," Kenge screamed into Gunto's ear. "The traps are not here."

The boys began to move along the shore hopping from boulders to the twisted mangrove roots encroaching from the shore. Occasionally the river splashed them as they cut close to the eddying froth, Kenge dancing from stone to stone while Gunto struggled, hugging the meager shore. Finally the river widened, the current lost its frenetic drive and slowed to a controlled rush.

The men of the village had chosen this spot to pile rocks through which the river sluiced. Four sets of rocky gateways funnelled the rapidly moving water. Wedged tightly between the gates were weirs, cone-shaped, open-ended fish traps which allowed fish in but not out. Kenge waded into the fastwater by himself. Gunto stood on the shore leaning two-handed on his spear supposedly guarding against the *pukpak* who would no more enter the rapids than would Gunto.

The first trap yielded two good-sized *telapia*, a coarse but good tasting fish. The next contained a large catfish

recently caught and full of fight. Kenge gingerly slipped two fingers into the gills, careful to avoid the spiny bones protruding from its back and sides. Three steps toward shore, a mighty heave and the fat squirming fish lay flapping at Gunto's feet. Immediately Gunto stepped back and plunged his spear through the beast's belly. The next two traps yielded only *lugs*, bitter bottom-feeding eels, oily and bad tempered. Kenge broke their necks with a twist and set their bodies adrift, due most likely to be food for their next of kin. On the way back Kenge stopped, still hip deep and watched the scene on shore. Gunto was on his haunches, eyes fixed, watching the fish on the end of his spear. Its barbels were writhing and curling in whatever pain its primordial nervous system would allow. Kenge slogged in and strung the *telapia* on a stick. The catfish's body relaxed and only then did Gunto turn from his strange reverie.

"They live long with the pain." Gunto put his foot on the fish and yanked his spear free. "Would we live so long?"

"No, not so long." Kenge strung the catfish and shouldered *lianas* aside for Gunto to precede him. It was at times like this that Kenge did not like Gunto walking behind him.

Half the trek home was made in silence. They found a new-fallen giant across their path beside which the two paused to gaze at the sky visible in the space formerly shuttered by the leaves of the toppled tree. In two suns the leaves from neighboring trees would swallow the void, darkening the forest floor once again and wizening the presumptuous sprouts which had dared to erupt in the brief daylight.

"I must speak to you Kenge." Gunto licked his lips and avoided Kenge's eyes. "The *barcina* is tomorrow and I am afraid. The cutting is too much to bear. I will scream and resist the knife, I know this." Gunto looked up and saw Kenge's look of incredulity, and increased the tempo of his words. "You know what they will do Kenge. *Wahabi* will rip my manhood from my body. She'll say I have no soul and banish me forever." Gunto's ashen lips were twitching over his misshapen teeth. "I was not sick at the time of the last *barcina*, many suspect this and I will be watched."

"What will you do?" Kenge's voice cracked with tension.

"I can cross the river at the traps and travel the plain to where the river widens. There are boats there, boats which trade up and down the river. The hooded ones will pay for a strong back to load and unload their goods. You can come with me Kenge, we are like brothers. You would like life on the river." Kenge was appalled at his friend's cowardice.

"No! My place is in the village. I do not fear the pain of the *barcina*. I have *Masisi* and a life with our people."

"And what of me Kenge? You said you were my brother, I would give my life for you." Gunto's eyes bored into Kenge.

Kenge's thoughts swirled in his brain, the childish orderly pattern of his life was fractured and panic coursed through him.

"Wait Kenge, you do not have to go. "Gunto spoke feverishly. "Just help me cross the river. You can go back and

they will perform the ceremony for you when you return. You can say I put a spell on you. They will believe that, they think I can speak to the night forest."

"A lie Gunto?"

"Yes, but a small lie. They would tear my body and cast me from the village. My brother, it is a small thing." Gunto breathed in a shallow pants, tears coursing down sunken cheeks. "My life is yours Kenge, you are kind, you will let me live."

Kenge sat, relieved that Gunto was no longer insisting that he accompany him in his flight. He could explain his absence to the elders, they would believe his story. He would only be late, they would understand.

"Yes Gunto, I will help you. We will leave tomorrow before dawn. We can cross the river when the sun is high."

"No, they will be watching, I cannot return tonight. The elders must think me far away. You must say we haven't been together today. I will wait for you at the river crossing, you can help me across and be back before the sun is low in the sky."

Kenge picked up the fish and watched as Gunto disappeared into the jungle on his way back to the river. The air was heavy and the sky gray when Kenge entered the small clearing which signalled the boundary of his village. Many of the huts had funnels of thin smoke curling upward if front of them.

His mother did not remark on his silence as she gave him his meal of catfish. A boy is about to become a man, she thought. My son will hunt for the tribe and sire many children.

Kenge saw the new respect in his mother's eyes and was tortured by the thought of his plan. Why did I befriend Gunto? Why am I risking everything for him? Sleep would not come easily this night.

Only the white coals on the cooking fires told Kenge the time had come to slink from the village. He glanced toward the warrior's compound. Preparations had been made to feast and honor the new men of the tribe. A succulent *sundala* was slowly roasting in the fire pit. This tiny antelope was difficult to track and cried like a human baby when caught in the hunter's nets, but its flesh was considered without equal.

For the boys of the tribe this was to be their day of glory, their entry into the world of adulthood. Few had slept well this night, but none so fitfully as Kenge.

Kenge stepped onto the path that led into the jungle. He saw unfamiliar shapes in the errant streaks of muted light that filtered through the trees from the cold moon above. Twice he thought he was off the path, but then a rock he knew, or a stump would emerge. Were they the same? Some force had changed them, everything had changed.

He felt apart from his body as it took stumbling panicky steps through the darkness. His mind was looking down from the night sky astounded that his body was betraying his destiny. Kenge's steps faltered then surged forward with a new resolve to have done with this task. A buibui web snared his face plastering itself to his hair and chest. Run Kenge, run to the river and Gunto. Night things made Kenge gasp in alarm as their frenzied fluttering assailed his ears. Bushes and creepers ripped at his flesh. Unfeeling, he dove further into the depths.

Was that the roar of the river ahead or the pounding of blood in his ears? The call of birds prefacing the gray dawn went unnoticed as Kenge sped closer to his meeting place. His lungs were burning now but he welcomed the pain, it tore his thoughts for a moment from what his family must be thinking of their son, their man.

Hours later he could see the mist from the river billowing over the shore growth at the water's edge. Kenge did not slow his pace until he had burst through the bushes and lay heaving on the stones by the swirling water.

How long he lay there he didn't know. His battered

flesh starving from exertion and his thoughts blazing with contradiction and uncertainty conspired to topple him into a pit of darkness.

Flies swarmed over his sweat-lathered body, feasting on blood from myriad tears and scrapes on his glistening brown skin. In a daze Kenge pushed himself to his knees, not noticing the pebbles which clung

embedded in his chest and thighs, pressed there by the weight of his unmoving body. One by one they released as Kenge lowered himself into the current.

With the cleansing of his body the rushing waters revitalized thoughts of his mission. New strength surged through him. Gunto must be waiting near the traps. He looked downstream and there they were, four stony sentinels leaning into the pounding rapids. Gunto would be on shore, waiting. Up and down the bank Kenge's eyes searched for his friend.

"Gunto," his voice boomed the name but the call barely reached his own ears so loud was the turbulent river.

Kenge scoured the shore for signs of Gunto. There were many footprints, were they fresh or from the previous day? Blood on the stones from yesterday's catch was dry and fading. There was nothing to show that anyone had been here in the last few hours. Had Gunto tried to ford the river on his own, panicked and been swept to his death?

Kenge's mind began a new turmoil. Concern for Gunto ebbed as his own perilous situation bolted to the forefront of his consciousness. Now it was time to look after himself. If he started back now he could reach home just as darkness fell. He could explain to Ongka, the chief, how Gunto's spell had lured him into the jungle, how he had overcome it and was

...He felt apart from his body as it took stumbling panicky steps through the darkness. A bui-bui web snared his face plastering itself to his hair and chest. Night things made Kenge gasp in alarm as their frenzied fluttering assailed his ears. Bushes and creepers ripped at his flesh. Unfeeling, he dove further into the depths....

now prepared for the ritual. His parents would be proud and Masisi would love him all the more for having the courage to fight the spell.

Kenge passed the fallen giant and looked up at the sky above, smaller now than yesterday. He began to walk with new found resolve. Stride for stride in tune with his body his mind beat a chanting cadence. Today I am a man, today I am a man, today I am a man.... The phrase burned in his mind and helped to mask the specters of doubt and fear which lay behind the flimsy sing-song barrier.

He was there. In a few steps he would enter the light cast by a blazing fire. Laughter and shouting reached out to him from a circle of village people. Sparks from the fire shot upward to die in the night sky. His chant froze on his lips and his terrors returned.

Should he rush in and begin his story? Should he go to his parent's hut? No, a man would walk in and confront his people. He would forget the story of the spell, only the truth would be heard this night. It was the only way for a man.

Into the circle he walked. He could see the laughing faces on the new men of the tribe lounging by the fire. Each young man girded his loins with the white tapa cloth, symbolic of his rite of passage. One more step and Kenge entered the light cast by the fire.

One by one the voices stopped and heads turned toward the trembling boy until only the crackling fire disturbed the silence. Kenge's lips were numb as he struggled to speak.

"My people, I was wrong to leave with Gunto. He was afraid of the barcina, I tried to help him...." Kenge's stomach lurched when from behind the fire strode a familiar figure. It was Gunto, white loin cloth in place as proof of the mornings ordeal. Kenge stared in horror as Gunto's lips pulled back in an obscene leer.

"Liar, coward." Gunto shrieked a high-pitched volley. "You think to include me in your flight from manhood? The bones in Gunto's hollow face protruded and the light from the fire yellowed his sunken eyes. Kenge staggered back into the darkness where strong hands gripped his flaccid arms and pushed him back into the light.

"See how he tries to escape again, "Gunto raged at the silent throng. "We must protect ourselves from such as he.

"The Wahgi people will be cleansed of this killer of souls."

"Wait Gunto." Kenge's father stood to face him. "We must listen to Kenge."

"I am no longer a boy Kala. Today I am a man. The spirits of the night forest tell me to expose this evil which would take the strength from our tribe." Gunto's spittle-flecked lips quivered, his eyes rolled in his head.

Ongka, the headman, stepped between Kala and the raving Gunto. "The ghosts of our ancestors speak through Gunto." He placed his hands on Kala's shoulders. Kala sank to his knees, arms covering his face.

The group turned as one when Wahabi emerged from the night, her dark form stooped and forbidding. In her hand was a short flat stick with two black curved thorns protruding

from its end.

On seeing Wahabi Kenge turned to flee. Four men fell on him and a fifth knelt on his chest while he bucked and wailed. Wahabi approached and stood over him. Tears stood in the folds of skin beneath her reddened eyes as she hunkered down before the hysterical boy. Her stick-like fingers scrabbled at his groin. Kenge's scrotum shrivelled in grim anticipation. Wahabi shuddered a sob.

"Close your eyes cucus, close your eyes little boy." A covey of startled birds took flight at the screams from the village. Soon they would settle again, perhaps by the river, where its rhythmic flow would lull them to sleep once more.

Lilacs at a Windy Wall

By Jessica Amanda Salmonson

Blossoming lilacs at a windy wall
Scent the sky with melancholy perfume.
Weedy old cemetery; ruined tomb;
Stones upon graves of the great and the small.
Gardens untended; friends forgotten; all
Is pathetic to witness and ponder:
O'er such decay must our sad ghosts wander,
Finding no caretaker heeding our call.

Lilacs at a windy wall blooming wild;
To these are we drawn, pitiful delight.
No one to see us, no one to take flight
Merely because 'round these lilacs we've whiled.
How could we have guessed the sorrow of night
When we selected our last resting site?

The Remembering Soul

By Jessica Amanda Salmonson

To Wendy Wees

When you or I have gone as each must go
Into the chamber of arriving souls
Will each gaze back across unlighted shoals
Bringing to mind the one who best we know?
This I believe. When bodies are but dust,
Physical desire scatters on the Earth
Seeking to capture souls into rebirth
That seek to flee the pain-infested gust.

Yet for a while our spirits will be free,
Devoid of anguish, loneliness, desire,
Purified by enlightenment and fire
Before plunging anew into the sea
Seeking to find again what once we found
When you and I were dew upon the ground.

The Graven Image By Storm Bear

BITCH, WHINE AND COMPLAIN

I am really becoming annoyed with Harlan "Limbaugh" Ellison. He whines all over the Sci-Fi Channel, almost an entire chapter is devoted to Harlan in William Shatner's book **STAR TREK MEMORIES**, there is a BBS in NYC called "I H8 HARLAN," and to top it off, "Acknowledgement to the works of Harlan Ellison" is in the credits of **THE TERMINATOR** (even despite the fact it was necessary).

Father, who art in Heaven, Harlan by thy name.

Anyway, the last point brings me to the problems that James Cameron is having making a movie. He is bouncing around from studio to studio pitching "Mankind's Ultimate Adventure." The reason for all of this bouncing is that the Adventure is gonna cost \$80,000,000.00 to film. So unless Jimmie Boy can make a \$30 Million movie, it may be awhile before he has something on the silver screen.

SOME UGLY BAD NEWS

Is that we shouldn't expect **STAR WARS: CHAPTER ONE OF THE ADVENTURES OF OWAN KENOBI** until 1997. Rumor has it that Georgie Boy may try to film the next three **STAR WARS** films back to back, **BACK TO THE FUTURE**-style and to coincide with the 20th Anniversary of the premiere of the first **STAR WARS** film. It was going to be early 1994 but George Lucas got distracted by **THE YOUNG INDIANA JONES CHRONICLES**. Also, the fourth installment of the **INDY** series is currently in the works. The working script is one of the **INDY 3** rejects. and, of course, there are script problems. Harlan must be on the Lucasfilm payroll.

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INTERVIEW WITH A VAMPIRE: THE

TOM CRUISE STORY finally got rolling after the tragic death of River Phoenix, who was cast to co-star alongside Towering Tom and quickly replaced by Christian Slater. Don't expect to see the platinum blonde Tom until November 1994. Also in November we can expect to flock to Kenneth Branagh's

the last season of **STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION** making its appearance on television even as you read this. However, three days after they wrap up the last TV episode they will begin shooting the **ST:NG** feature film. All of the dark hoards of my **DEATHREALM** spics couldn't get any info on the script except for one tiny adjective; juicy.

THE NEW AGE FLIPPER REMAKE

Called **SEAQUEST: DSV** actually has gotten better. The Video Toaster (a computer that can do just about everything there is to do concerning special effects, animation or film production and costs less than \$4,000) produces all of the underwater scenes as the series uses no fine scale models. These scenes have matured and the powers that be are beginning to let the shows creator write more of the episodes. Even at its worst, the show ranked first in ratings in its time slot. Hulk-ania must have truly died.

The two hour Dodge commercial, titled **VIPER**, has officially been introduced to the airwaves. I thought the show ran out of gas in the first thirty minutes. The show was just morphed to death. This popped out, that air foil changed; I hated it all. Wasn't **KNIGHT RIDER** bad enough? Must we suffer more or is this all an elaborate scheme for

the Sci-Fi Channel to increase the size of their "Series Collection?" The whole show was god awful.

William Shatner's **TEK WAR** has come to television as part of an anthology called **Action Pack** and appears randomly in syndication. **TEK WAR** originally started out as a story idea of Shatner's that was developed into a novel with the help of a ghost writer-not Harlan "Wanna kiss my plot decoder ring?" Ellison, to assist with the insertion of verbs and other such gram-



(**HENRY V, DEAD AGAIN**) version of **FRANKENSTEIN** and starring, believe it or not, Robert De Niro. Another classic monster movie is coming in March starring Jack Nicholson in the big budget bonanza, **WOLF**, which will co-star Michelle Pfeiffer. I hope this doesn't turn out to be one of those dog meets cat, dog eats cat stories.

COMING SOON TO AN OVERPRICED CABLE SYSTEM NEAR YOU: Television has been a whirlwind of Sci-Fi/Horror activity this season. We have

mathematical nonsense. Five books later and a deal with Universal brings these good stories to television. I must admit, I had low hopes for this series and here is where I swallow my id, ego, pride and all; it kicked ass! (said Beavis to the fly) **TEK WAR** is what **WILD PALMS** should have been and Oliver Stone should hang his head in shame because **TEK WAR** delivered and delivered hard; right in the teeth television. Greg Evigan (**B.J. & THE BEAR**. Don't remember? Not surprised, since hardly anyone survived the therapy.) stars in this high tech, "action packed," techno-shaman thriller that delivers on plot, character development, visual opulence and excellent writing. I could care less about the rest of the other shows that make up Action Pack. I just wanna see the next installment of **TEK WAR** so I can jack in and flip.

LET'S TAKE A GOOD IDEA AND MILK IT TO DEATH

The Paramount Media Machine is already writing the stories behind yet another **STAR TREK** spinoff called **STAR TREK: VOYAGERS**. One **RUMOR** has it that the Federation is not heavily featured in this series. It is more of an adventure on a private vessel. My hopes that they will explore strange new worlds, new civilizations...and exploit them. Can you imagine a **STAR TREK** series that featured pirates, scathing murderers and criminals that wiped their asses with the Prime Directive? I would love it; an "I, Claudius" set in outer space. The other rumor, which is probably the truer of the two, is that a small Federation ship gets thrown into some part of the universe where there is no apparent hope of returning. The second rumor also has a crew member whose only physical form is some sort holographic apparition. My feeling is that Rick Berman will wimp out and choose a safe route for TV. I would still like to see radioactive galactic mutants digging up buried Ferengi treasure.

CLUTCH MY GRITS AND CALL ME GRAY

Speaking of **STAR TREK** and shocking things, I was talking on the phone to local screenwriter, J.C. Williams (shame-

less name drop), while the TV was serving as a noise generator. I had begun to speak an absolutely incredible prepositional phrase when I heard a man screaming on the television with a familiar Scottish accent. My head jerked up as I dropped the phone and there I saw the most unbelievable sight; James Doohan waving a fireplace poker yelling at someone to get the hell out of his house. He actually plays a character on the daily soap opera: **THE BOLD & THE BEAUTIFUL**. The first thing that popped into my head was, "He really must need to make a house payment". However, his acting is better here than on **STAR TREK**.

Duh.

SCARIEST RECENT QUOTE:

"Macaulay Culkin will be our next Clark Gable."--*Oliver Stone*

REVIEWS

Deathrealm Grave Depth

Movie Rating System

1 Foot Under - Smelly. Shallow. Decomposes before your very eyes.

2 Feet Under - It's not buried deep enough as it reminds you of frejoles and tequila; you know it is going to come back up to haunt you.

3 Feet Under - Half as good as your regular grave but not as fulfilling.

4 Feet Under - Lacks real depth, but shallow graves can be interesting.

5 Feet Under - Similar to a funeral where the coffin is dropped and the mutilated, beheaded body rolls down the church steps; an event that is not to be missed.

6 Feet Under - A film to die for.

BABYLON 5:

Midnight on the Firing Line

First Episode of the First Season

Creator/Writer/Executive Producer -

J. Michael Straczynski

Director - Richard Compton

4 Feet Under

and may be buried deeper in the future

THE BIG SHOCKER is of course is that **BABYLON 5** is back on the air. The original pilot **YANKED HARD**. I searched vigorously to find someone who did like it. I found it was somewhat popular with the young teen crowd, but many adults had stronger complaints than the one I have voiced here.

BABYLON 5, also, heavily uses the new wonder tool called the Video Toaster for the space scenes. Foundation Imaging and their Toaster Farm has been cranking out scene after scene for the new series during these last few months. One of the show's creators regularly appears on Internet and speaks of how the Pilot had too many executives in the kitchen and a lot of the creatives are really embarrassed over the pilot.

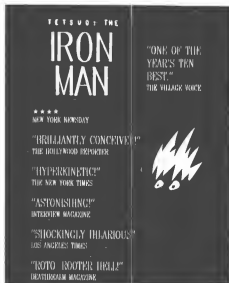
The new episodes are sworn to have a multilevel, rich plot line with lots of character development. I started to believe him as he was preaching to the newest member of the choir. I could smell Abraham and see the Pearly gates flung wide assed open when a Devilish message entered my computer networked Eden. The Scripture read "The scripts will be in great shape. We've hired Harlan 'Here We Fuckin' Go Again' Ellison as our conceptual consultant!"

Rick Berman, the Executive Producer of **ST:NG**, replied "No Comment" when asked of his opinion of the **BABYLON 5** Pilot. We will see.

The second big shocker is that the first episode didn't yank at all. In fact I actually liked it after the ultra depressing Pilot. The Toaster graphics have greatly matured and the Commander Jeffery Sinclair character has been unstiffened to the point that he is now equal to Al Gore. Peter Jurasik's portrayal of the Centaurian Ambassador, Londo, still has his thick Russian accent and has the best screen presence of any of the other characters. A new addition to the cast is Lt. Commander Ianova (aka, Babylon Bitch) is well played by Claudia Christian. All of the acting is much more real and the characters and their histories are better fleshed out.

To keep up with the most hip trends of the day, Hollywood also is heavily into recycling and the new set of **B5** is no stranger to the trend. During this 22 episode thick first season, a face from the past will grace the screen as an ambassador aboard the space station and that will be, none other than ex child star, Bill Mumy who played Will Robinson (Danger, Nielsen families!)

ther the pilot nor the episodes are full of the technospeak that proliferates in any of the present **STAR TREK** fare and the environment is much more grittier than **DEEP SPACE 9** and instead of the squeaky clean Federation, **B5** has an everpresent political Big Brother, the best example is "recruitment" into the Psy Corps. At least they still have Daffy Duck to provide comic relief.



Tetsuo: The Iron Man
 Starring: Tomoroh Taguchi &
 Kei Fujiwara
 Directed by Shinya Tsukamoto
 * Five Feet Under *

DID YOU EVER drop acid while looking at a beautiful woman in a train station and want to rape her with a Roto-Rooter? If you haven't, then this film is a must see. It is odd, I mean the kinda of odd that would have Santa as a Klansman or maybe a Klingon Drag Queen mud wrestling with Ru Paul. B-Zare!

This live action story begins with a fetishist (played by the director) cutting open his leg to insert a cable bundle. To is shock, maggots invade the wound and he runs screaming from the house where he is hit by a car. Later the driver, after touching the fetishist, begins to have little metal parts spring up on his body as his flesh peels away. His changes really take effect after a lovemaking session with his girlfriend. His penis turns into a sewer screw and it saws

right through the coffee table and eventually kills his lover. This was more than a death by yeast infection. No amount of Monostat-7 could have helped this bon-sai babe.

The driver and the fetishist eventually meet again for a showdown of revenge involving wire, metal and solder. The two entwine themselves, fighting and battling each other while gathering more metal until they are one and then vow to join forces and take over the world and sail off into the sunset in what looks like a huge metallic Mardi Gras float shaped as an erect penis. The only thing it doesn't do is ejaculate spark plugs.

TETSUO is the Japanese version of **ERASERHEAD** and I must admit that this film out Lynch's Lynch. You may have seen Shinya Tsukamoto's work on MTV as he directed Billy Idol's Shock to the System video. His style is very unique as it combines a David Lynch feel, sexual innuendo, a Lydia Lunch sense of dread and self loathing, stop motion photography on moving actors and a neo-Fellini look for a very profound effect.

The film itself has little dialogue as the first words spoken are twelve minutes into the film. It is of course subtitled, however the acting is honed to the point that the actors emotional expressions are so good that they relay much more of the story than the dialogue ever could.

There is a sequel called **TETSUO II: THE BODYHAMMER**. This flick was filmed in color right on the heels of **IRON MAN**, however I haven't seen it and cannot find it on video ANYWHERE. This gem is probably to be found in an independent video rental store in the foreign film section. Chad, my local Blockbuster service representative, told me that "TETSUO doesn't fit our target demographic group".

Go figure.

Dollman Vs. The Demonic Toys
 Starring: Tim Thomerson
 Produced/Directed By Charles Band
 Full Moon Entertainment

* Two Feet Under *
COLOSSAL WOULD BE a very bad

way to describe **DOLLMAN VS. THE DEMONIC TOYS**. Most of the principal characters are all under 15" tall, the plot was shallow (even by Full Moon's standards!) and the movie barely pushed over the one hour mark.

Don't get me wrong, I love a 'bad' movie, but one just fell short. Full Moon Entertainment combined several of its film franchises to make a narrow multi sequel. Of course, Tim Thomerson's character from **DOLLMAN** was used along with Nurse Ginger, the girl that got shrunk in **BAD CHANNELS** and all of the toys from **DEMONIC TOYS**. All of the original movies that these separate characters came from were entertaining films but combined in this brief script, the outcome was a tiny payoff.



Dollman goes in search of Nurse Ginger (aka Dollchick) and has sex with her in a kitchen drawer while these possessed toys prepare for the return of their "Dark Master", which occurs on Halloween at midnight. When the Dark Master returns he will embody the Toy named Baby Oopsy and by the time midnight roles around, Baby Oopsy kidnaps Dollchick, straps her to a bed

(Continued on page 62)

Death's Door

Magazine Reviews by Andrea Locke



HELIOCENTRIC NET, Vol. 2, #4. PO Box 68817, Seattle, WA 98168-0817. Editor: Lisa Jean Bothell. 8.5"x11", 33 Pages. \$4.50

WELL, I HATE to say it, but I am a little annoyed with **HELIOCENTRIC NET**. It tires me that I continue to read small press magazines that have ten or so stories centered around a similar theme. If one wants to have a collection of stories about folks being in coffins, that's fine, but if you are striving for variety, then at least give us a sampler.

To wit: the first story *But I Ain't Dead* by Dennis Beecher is admittedly a wonderful story about being in a casket while the twisted social ritual called The Viewing takes place. Sixteen pages later, we find Buzz Lovko's *Survival Instinct*, a somewhat touching story about a guy in a casket getting out, visiting the family and returning to the casket.

QED, about 20% of H-NET's stories begin with guys in caskets.

Lisa Jean Bothell is not the only one that is guilty of this; **ELDRITCH TALES**, and **DEAD OF NIGHT**, both of which I have recently reviewed, have gone the same route.

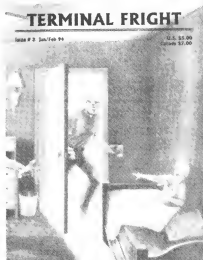
*Nuff said on that.

The rest of H-NET was quite good. Except for the above mentioned faux pas, and an advertisement disguised as a Jon Herron (**MIDNIGHT ZOO**) interview, I was quite entertained. The story *Stolen Sisters* is an example of some-

thing I wish would happen to me. Sherrie Brown's work has matured since I last saw her work, somewhere. *Over Easy*, by Kenneth Goldman, is an essay about when writers block turns into a fiendish web of nightmarish proportions. A true reflection of life.

Wonderful bits of poetry are blended well throughout the issue. Maybe one of the reasons it was nominated for Best magazine/Editor 1993 by SPWAO. I thought the most delicious of these tidbits are *Marionettes* by Delories Selinsky, Kat Ricker's *Drink* was quenching, as was *Whirlpool* by Bobbi Sinha. Other highlights were the interview with J.N. Williamson and *Nobody's Child* by Christopher Hivner.

H-NET seems to be growing into a hive of fresh writers, many of whom will leave the nest to become victims of a very bright spotlight.



Terminal Fright #2. P.O. Box 100, Black River, NY 13612. Editor: Ken Abner. 8.5"x11.0". 50 Pages, \$5/US, \$7/Canada.

NOW I AM really scared.

I reviewed **TERMINAL FRIGHT** #1 in the last issue and found it unbelievably OUTSTANDING. Now after reading #2, I must say they out did themselves again. I cannot yell loud enough to express how pleased with the seemingly great success of **TERMINAL FRIGHT**. I'll admit, I thought deep down that all of their really good stuff

might have all been thrown in issue #1, for that sadly happens to many small press startups; it is a difficult business. But this completely demonstrates that I hope to be reviewing **TERMINAL FRIGHT** for quite some time to come.

The scary thing is that this mag is good competition for us, and I can hear Mark now: "Faster! I said type faster!" Heh--maybe, now I can get that bigger cage I've been promised.

Just looking at the cover is to get involved with the magazine. The cover art depicts part of a story which started in #1. The current cover story theme will consist of seven total installments. Right now it looks like the preacher is gonna get it.

This issue sprints out of the gate with Craig A. Strickland's *Doghead*. It was a quick read but packed punch. I didn't expect the ending at all. The lesson: inspect vehicle after contact with roadkill. Right on the heels of *Doghead* comes *Shadow and Light*. This tale, by Anke Kriske, is one of the better campfire ghost stories I've read in the last couple seasons. She achieved a high degree of realism by connecting to things most of us has either seen or experienced, using our own inner thoughts as a lattice work to keep us up at night. This one was my favorite.

Steven E. Wedel is represented by his terrifying Western themed story about an evil water elemental that has taken resident in a very rare and badly needed oasis. And I thought the only thing you had to do was just boil the water you get out of creeks. I've learned my lesson.

The next story kind of reminded of a Cure concert I went to. Half of the people there wanted to commit suicide and the other half wanted to write poetry about it. Terry Campbell pens a story about a night shift morgue employee that has been contemplating suicide on Christmas Eve called *Second Chances*. He sits at his desk with a hand full of pills and a nearby whiskey bottle. A few hours into his shift he wakes up to with a jolt as singing is coming from the morgue freezer. Most of the bodies that committed suicide that night awake, warm, and alive. You begin to think that they bring him to realize that he really doesn't want to die. The other suicides

that didn't come back had been here before and blew their second chance. He begins to feel that maybe all is right with the world and returns to his desk to find his pill bottle empty and whiskey gone. Round two has begun.

Everlasting Grace by Kat Ricker is a long, quasi-vampire story that continuously keeps the reader off balance with plot deviations, but in the end it makes the climax a stunning conclusion. I was not real clear as to who was the tale's resident sicko; the beautiful, thin, young, blood drinking religious fanatic or the crazed, manipulative, twisted, stalking med student. It did remind me of **DARK SHADOWS** in the way the story unfolded but without the lighting crew wondering around.

One of our readers complained a while back that **DEATHREALM** printed a story that is more documentary than fiction. Well, **TERMINAL FRIGHT** may be guilty of the same thing with Charlee Jacob's *Delta*. It dealt with a new phenomenon called the Appalachian Triangle. Aircraft fall out of the sky and crash in this one small area and the local poverty stricken children scavenge through the wreckage for clothing and maybe food. Then this tabloid reporter gets involved and—well the outcome is refreshingly ghastly.

The last story in this seven story issue is *Fire-Eater* by Gary Lynn Morton. At first I thought this was another *Firestarter* rip-off and was surprised that the editor would let something like that slip into a magazine that really strives for quality. Then it hit me that this was more than just a *Firestarter* story; it's a demon possession story, revealing what might go on in the heads of these particular nasties. The BIG thing that I like about this tale is that it shows New Agers, Tarot Readers and Wiccans in a role that is more realistic than is shown in Hollywood films. Although the rituals used are not all technically correct, it is rather a moot point since the exorcism isn't performed by anybody Catholic. It makes for a refreshing change, in allowing the reader to experience a different form of the rite of exorcism—even further defining "evil". It makes for a much more terrifying story than Bette

Midler running around with bucked teeth and a large nose.

The only thing that **TERMINAL FRIGHT** lacks is art and poetry. Besides the cover art, there is zero in the way of pictures of any kind. None, and I hate that. The art power combo of Simon/Buburuz can help a lot here. Hey guys, just ask them. I am sure they can be of a big help. Even photocopies of bad tattoos, maybe?



THE SILVER WEB #10, Fall/Winter 1993. Published semi-annually by BUZZCITY PRESS, PO Box 38190, Tallahassee, Florida 32315. 64pp. Editor: Ann Kennedy. \$4.75.

THE LAST TIME I reviewed this magazine, the read was a pleasant surprise. This time around, the surprise was not quite so pleasant.

The magazine starts out nicely enough, with a superb front cover by the featured artist, Jill Bauman. I was ready to read fiction and features that were as good in their ways as was the cover. Ah, well...

Ms. Kennedy states in her own column that **THE SILVER WEB** has undergone a change in its editorial slant, a move away from horror and toward fiction of a more experimental nature. Well, I am all for a good, introspective, claustrophobic work now and again; but I do not wish to make a regular diet of such literature. And that is the kind of story this issue of Web is full of:

The issue starts off with *A Vampire, An Answering Machine, A Black Cat and Yellow Freesias* by K. Huebner. I'm not

sure what kind of story this is supposed to be (Ms. Kennedy's goal), but I am sure of one thing: I was not entertained by the tale's shallow, quickly sketched characters. This story should, I suppose, be interpreted as an exploration of two people in search of a relationship. If the principals had been interesting, the story could have held my interest. As it was, I was bored.

This story was followed by Robert O'Connor's *Toby*. Stylistically, this was the best of the lot. O'Connor does a really nifty job of showing us the mentally twisted fellow, Tobias Nordwalder. Imagine an IQ the size of your waistband with the power of Aladdin's genie and you have the gist of this story. My one and only problem was that I found it to be just a tad predictable. But this was the best of the lot.

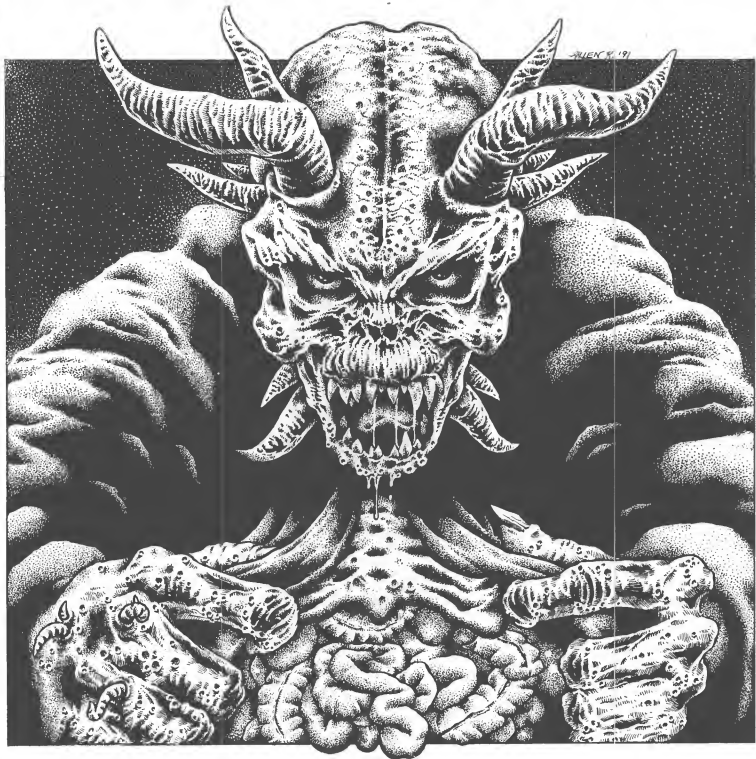
Julien Brantingham delivers up *Little Men*. This story is fairly representative of the type I see too much of in the small and semi-professional press. It's quite descriptive—one gets to know the protagonist's environs on an intimate basis. And one gets to read lots and lots about the protagonist's ineffectual hand-wringing. I was left thinking of this story as one, unbelievably long whine.

As if this wasn't bad enough, I actually find myself growing weary of the tales of D.F. Lewis. It isn't that I don't admire some of his singular work; it's just that he's beginning to drone. As I have said before, he has a wonderful grasp of the English language, but his vision is at times tiresome. I have read some two dozen of his stories by now, and while he sometimes is able to evoke some emotion in me, his fiction too often leaves me blank. Here, his *The Horn of Europe* does just that; I was left yet again sighing and looking for something more interesting to read.

The remainder of the fiction in this lamentable issue of the **WEB** is pretty much unremarkable. None of it was truly poor, but none of it moved me. At all.

And finally, if the fiction was not what I hoped it would be, the non-fiction was less than that. The worst thing

(Continued on page 45)



The PINK TWIST INN

By Wayne Allen Sallee

THE BLOATED GHOST wasn't mentioned in the Tribune until March. I had been following him around at least a month before that. He hadn't solidified enough for me to warn him. About what

was going to happen to him. Once they caught up with him.

The dead look after their own, saints and sinners alike.

His crime was more despicable than mine by far, so they would be on to him that much quicker. See, even in death, you can't escape justice. The kind that should have been meted out, what some call jungle justice and others call mercy killing.

Richard Speck escaped the electric chair when the Supreme Court overruled such decrees in the early seventies. He still got life in prison, but died having served only twenty-five years at Stateville. Emphysema, clogged arteries, chain-

smoking; Speck died of a heart attack the day before he'd have turned fifty.

I knew it was him because of what he was trying to find.

The Pink Twist Inn.

The dive he spent drinking and brawling in the night after he raped and killed those eight nurses up near Calumet.

I knew it when it never had a name, back in the days before prohibition, blind pigs, and speakeasies. Things keep changing in Chicago. After Speck went to Joliet, the neighborhood went from skid row to grab-bag gay town. Now, the Pink Twist is gone.

What remains is a parking lot for the Rock 'n Roll McDonalds.

But the bloated ghost still stumbles around, searching. Knowing goddamn well that he's dead. They *all* know that they are no longer part of the passing parade. Of course, Speck could have fried his brain on toilet bowl sour mash years before. I know all sorts of things about those messed up bastards who have escaped execution.

I'm the impartial jury for the afterlife. For how long, I don't know. I've seen the Chicago Fire, back when concrete slabs covered the ground because what passed for roads in those days were all muddy from Lake Michigan's overspill. There wasn't any landfill until the World's Fair of 1893. After that, the near North Side became Tower Town. There's a building right around here, it still has a gallows in the basement, which has long since been boarded up. Terribly Tommy O'Connor escaped from jail here in 1925, escaped the hangman's noose, because that was the way of justice in those days. About the only thing they haven't tried in the Cook County courts is the guillotine. (I'm counting city-sanctioned gangland killings like the St. Valentine's Day Massacre here.) Maybe this is why I am here to witness, because there has been so much death in this city.

Anyway, the judges kept the gallows there for all time. Mayor Daley conceded that O'Connor was probably in his nineties some years back, but still the aging hemp remained in the basement of what became a flourishing comedy club.

O'Connor died of natural causes a few months after he escaped the makeshift jail. Drank himself to death on Madison Street. The executioner was waiting for him. There was only *one* executioner in those days.

They dragged him along, still stumblebum drunk, to the Kinzie Street bridge. Looped the protoplasmic rope around his neck and let him drop. The rope broke along with Terrible Tommy O'Connor's neck, but there was no splash.

Back then, we were all invisible. Tommy's ghost is still doing pirouettes in the North Branch of the Chicago River. Justice had been served. I wonder if the reason more of the recent dead are appearing as wraiths is because hell or purgatory is becoming overloaded with souls. That must sound like a trailer for some trashy film like they show nowadays, but I am sincere in believing this. Especially here. So many people on Death Row. Only one execution since 1962.

The executioner back then had my face, I would almost swear. Thing is, I can't even remember what I did that was

so evil. But as the jury, I try to warn the dead about the executioners--a triumvirate now; Father, Son, Holy Ghost, yada yada--because it must be that way. It's not like I'm a snitch, though that might be why I *am* here. Food for thought. I'm just supposed to do it. I'm compelled.

When Ed Tomczak left the Grimes' sisters to freeze to death back in 1956, I was there to warn him after his aneurysm took him a year later. He scoffed at me, until the three executioners shoved him into the Humboldt Park Lagoon. He screamed innocence, wanting to know where Heaven was, because it sure wasn't the intersection of California and Division. The invisible Eddie Tomczak froze right quick and the skaters had a nice hill to jump over before the spring thaw.

I watch it all go down, from Rogers Park down past the Patch and into the Loop. The woman who allegedly jumped from the 86th floor of the Hancock Building in 1971 wasn't a suicide. Her pimp found himself doing the jumping without a net routine a few years later, his veins still black from the bad shit someone gave him.

For kicks, I stood underneath him, had to move a bit when the ghost body split when it connected with the 34th floor, and was still amazed when the guy's head and chest went right through me, through Michigan Avenue, and on down to Hell. We sinners are so transparent.

Now there are reports of the ghosts. Keeping in mind that this is the singles' bar district, the Hard Rock Cafe and Excalibur, Club Karloff and Jukebox Saturday Nite, most of the Chicago Avenue cops chalk such reports up to either drunkenness or guys trying to spook their dates so they can slip them the meat. More urban legends, like the escaped mental patient with the hook or the choking doberman.

People were seeing Speck for nights, but the new generation didn't have a clue as to who he was. In the sodium lights of the parking lot, I could even make out the pock marks on his ugly face.

And he still hadn't a clue.

THEY CAME FOR him last night. The executioners are shape-shifters. I know this from a half century ago, when I stared back at my own face.

Maybe Speck saw all the people he had outlived besides the eight nurses. Judge Paschen died in 1973, Joe Matusek in 1987. The latter always swore he would kill Richard Speck if he was ever released from custody. I'm partial to it being those two that Speck saw at the end of the end. The third one might have been the first cop on the scene, Daniel Kelly, who had dated Gloria Davy. Walked into the townhouse in 1966 to see her naked body, face down on the couch, saliva dripping onto her bra. Kelly was killed in the line of duty in 1973.

I wish I didn't know all these things.

I wish I could go now.

There was a dilemma here. The method of death. In Illinois, execution was now administered by lethal injection. No electric chair, and that was the way Speck had to go.

(Continued on page 61)



In Death's Eyes WEARINESS Weeps

By Greg K. Puckett

CINCINNATI (AP) -- He claims he's tired; weary, to be exact.

Slumped in an armchair, DEATH puffs on a cigarette and blows smoke rings into a dusky lamp. His long, bony fingers tap the padded arms of the chair, and he glances around the room, his eyes hidden behind wire-rimmed, mirrored sunglasses. In a sandpaper voice, he says, "Don't judge me. Please, don't pass judgment on me."

He speaks quietly but is easy to hear.

"I'm a plain, cold-blooded, psychotic murderer. That's what you think, isn't it? But I'm not. That's not me. Some people call me DEATH. A few call me JUSTICE!"

DEATH'S FACE is pale and emotionless, as though an invisible shield is hiding his inner-thoughts. And for the past seven years, we've all wondered what those thoughts could be: what could DEATH be thinking? Until now, DEATH has not spoken out in explanation or defense of what he has become to all of America: a living, breathing myth traveling about the nation, bringing his namesake with him (we assume breathing; we know he doesn't eat or sleep).

At the hotel where I speak with him, all I can see is my distorted reflection in his sunglasses. His narrow face is hollow and ashen, as if there isn't blood flowing or life happening below the skin. Looking toward me, he says, "What do I call myself? What am I? Am I the monster that the world is making me out to be? Hell, I don't know . . . yes, yes I do." He looks out the window and raises his cigarette to his mouth, and breathes deeply. For a long moment--too long--he holds the smoke in, and then exhales it in a blue fog and slowly says, "What I'm doing . . . I believe what I'm doing is right. Whether that's justice or murder, you'll have to decide what you think. I can't control it, even if I wanted to."

From all information that has been gathered about DEATH, this could be an accurate statement: he enters a city (without knowing anything about it) and seems to choose a house at random, goes in, and then murders his victim. But is it random? The people that have been killed seem to have one common factor: they've all committed an atrocity toward the Earth (for a small number of the victims, there is no exact proof of this). The only substantiated fact to support this is a report by the few who have witnessed his murders: that DEATH before he kills his victim claims that it's being done for Mother Earth and her children.

To this date, DEATH's victims total 952.

Now, he leans forward and peers into my face, and seems to be searching for something. Maybe he finds it, because he says, "Hey man, I don't want to take life anymore.

I'm weary, I'm sleepy. Goddamn, I'm tired. But it's not like I can stop it, it's not like it's a job that I can quit."

He slumps back into the chair and turns to the window and whispers a curse under his breath.

Sadly, he says, "Sometimes I love murder. Not the violence of it, not the death of it, but the truth of it."

He lights a cigarette and smokes about half of it.

And then, he says, "I'll tell you some truth. Listen."

And then he, describes the death of Harold J. Budstein.

I DON'T KNOW when. Time is meaningless to me, anymore. It was cold and I think I was in Chicago or Boston . . . a larger city, but not New York. I don't know where.

It was midnight and I walked the streets with my head lowered and my eyes half-closed; I wanted to look at the faces, but didn't . . . I couldn't, you know?

So much life, I was thinking, so much life and so much death.

The pale neons shimmered in the cold, windy night, like the hideous sirens singing to the sailors, offering warmth and companionship, only for a little hard cash or maybe a soul. Up and down the street, people seemed to flow toward these beacons of light to escape the night, the chill; they feared the dark, the cold, they feared death. Their minds and bodies reeked of fear, of terror. That's all their fucking worlds are.

I knew I was beyond simple fear; I was untouchable.

I weaved through the masses; they parted for me, like the Red Sea. My head was bowed and my arms hidden in the warmth of my cloak. I wanted to search the eyes, but I didn't; it'd only bring pain. So, I kept my eyes lowered and watched the ground and walked the path that pulled me. I was being summoned, and I could feel it drawing me forward, dragging me as though I were its slave. I couldn't turn away from its pull. It spoke to me and I listened. I followed its voice through the wintry night, knowing I had no control.

The lights faded. I'd walked into a suburb of rich fools and their old houses. A line of street lamps lit my way and led me toward my only destination. It was as though all roads in the world led to this one house, and no matter how hard I could've tried, I couldn't have turned away from it. It was a white stone structure with six columns in the front, three floors, and a virgin smell around it, but there was nothing virginal about it. Nothing. I knew. I could feel the badness inside this house, I could feel its awfulness, and it made me want to do what I'd come to do.

I walked down the driveway and stepped up onto the porch and banged the door with my fists, WHOP, WHOP, WHOP. There was a hollowness in the sound, as though the house was empty of all life, but he was there.

I could feel his sins, just like you can feel a headache. It hurt inside me, inside my soul (yes, I do have a soul) and I wanted badly to kill him to stop the aching. When he saw me, I knew he'd scream; they always did, and they always begged for mercy, but I offered no quarter, not for dark, defeated souls like his.

My banging had woken up the neighborhood. Across the street, porch lights blinked on and faces peered through curtains. But none of them opened their doors. No one asked me what

the fuck I was doin' there in the middle of the night. They knew me; and if they knew the man inside, they knew why I was there. They were curious but not brave, not stupid.

I ignored the peeping eyes and continued attacking the wood.

Finally, the door opened on a chain.

A crisp, blue eye peered through the crack at me and looked me up and down. She also knew me; they all do, they all expect me to come to their house and bring a little sadness.

Some are unwilling to invite me in and I have to wreak a little havoc. But this time, the door closed, the chain was taken off, and then the door opened wide.

A white, brittle hand motioned me in. The front room was dark, but I saw the lady moving across the room and then stop and turn. This poor woman leaned against the wall with her head bowed and she sobbed. She was to be pitied; for it was her that lived with her husband's crimes. With tears, she said, "You've come for him, haven't you?" I was silent. She looked at me and knew. "He's yours; take him to hell; I don't care," she said.

I nodded and walked past the old woman into a hallway and up the stairs. With each step, visions of his sins slowly took hold of my mind and when I was in his room, and I looked into his cold, gray eyes, the hideousness of his crimes swept over me. I saw a black ocean, black as coal and thick as mud; and charcoal beaches, with dark sand and murky, dead waves; and dead birds littered about the shores; and dead fish floating in the lifeless ocean; and suffering whales searching for clean seas . . . Anger boiled in the pit of my stomach and rose to my chest, and then erupted in a horrible scream; all my rage was in that scream, all my sorrow. Clenched fist, I slammed against the wall and shook the house, and slammed again and again and again and then I stopped.

Calmly, I fell to my knees, before the old man.

My head was level with his. For the first time, I looked at him, and saw a gross, fat, old man without hair, without fear. Sitting in a padded armchair, he glared at me, mad as hell.

"How dare you!" he said. "How dare you fucking come into my goddamned house—"

Before he could finish, I slammed the palm of my hand into his forehead with enough force to lift his body up and backward. The chair started to flip over, but before it could crest its balance, I caught and straightened it.

I sat the fat old man deeply in the cushions and said, "Fool."

The old man whispered, "I'm gonna die anyway, aren't I? Aren't you DEATH?" And he leaned forward and spit in my eye.

As quickly as I could, with my left hand, I reached to him and grabbed the top of his head and pulled him forward. With my right hand, I pried his mouth open and grabbed his tongue and snapped it from his mouth.

Now, he could say no more words.

He screamed and shook his head and beat his face with his hands. The blood filled his mouth and dribbled down his chin; he tried to spit the blood out, but couldn't.

I held his tongue before his eyes and then threw it across the room. And I said: "You must die for your sins against Mother Earth. For what you've done, there is no justice, there is no penalty great enough. I've come for your soul!"

From inside my cloak, I pulled out my long blade and its silver edge shimmered in the pale light. "In the name of Mother Earth: Die and go to HELL!" I said. Never taking my eyes from his eyes, I slid the blade into his stomach and lifted. The blade cut through the rib cage and when it reached his cold heart, there was a small, red explosion, splattering blood everywhere. His eyes faded and then flickered out and he sagged in the chair and died.

He deserved to die.

DEATH STOPS HIS story and looks into my eyes for a long time.

He shakes his head and says, "This man deserved nothing less than death. I don't know his name; I don't know exactly what he did and I don't care. All I need to see is that black ocean, and I know he deserved what I gave him. Killing a man like him, lets me KNOW I'm right in what I'm doing! It helps me ignore all those fools with their pointin' fingers, saying I'm a monster, saying I'm something evil. Killing a man like him is truth!"

It has been said (by environmentalists, mostly) that Harold J. Budstein, number 462 on this long list of murders, deserved it more than the others. Budstein, the former owner and president of Rosy Bud Oil Company, ordered Captain J.T. Fox to take his tanker, the Seal, through a storm off the coast of Alaska. This demand by Budstein caused the wreck and destruction of the Seal, producing the worst oil spill in the nation's history. The coast has yet to recover, and many (mostly environmentalists) say it never will. Obviously, this is the crime that Harold Budstein died for.

"When I walked up the stairs," DEATH continues, "and saw him, I felt so sad for all the birds and fish that died because of this selfish, unconscious fool. How can anyone say that this man didn't deserve to die?"

The only penalties for Budstein was his resignation from the firm. The government was asked to take criminal action by environmental groups but refused.

DEATH glances to the ground, gathering words, and when he can't find the words that he needs, he knocks a cigarette out of the pack and grabs it with his lips, but doesn't light it. "I don't understand those people that follow me," he says, "telling me that I'm the devil, that I'm evil."

When he enters a city (his whereabouts being reported by the news media), a gathering (consisting of all denominations of preachers) waits for him and then follows him to the house or apartment building that he walks to and patiently waits outside (singing hymns) and then follows him to the city limits. The majority wish they could stop DEATH, and many have tried by shouting prayers, throwing holy water, shooting him, spraying him with gasoline and lighting it. One priest even tried to exorcise the demon out of him.

None of this has an affect on him.

Nothing stops DEATH.

"They won't stop. Never. I hate them," DEATH states. "What bothers me the most, is the fact that they don't understand me and haven't tried in the least. They call me SATAN and DEATH. They curse me. You know, I don't need that shit. Don't need some preacher, telling me that I'm evil. At least, I don't take money for what I do. They follow me. There's a pack of 'em in the lobby of the hotel right now, ready to save my soul, if only I'll stop killin' their precious moneygivers. Jesus Christ, they can't understand. Everywhere I go, they're on my heels, with their bibles, 'peakin' the gospel, telling me to open my heart and accept the Savior. For the most part, I ignore them. But, sometimes it gets to me, sometimes it bothers me. They say I'm the livin' devil, and I'm not really."

DEATH strikes a match and leans the cigarette into the flame. He puffs smoke out for a few seconds and then takes the cigarette out of his mouth and says, "But notice when I look their way, they cringe. They know, that if they're bad boys, that one day I'll come for them. And I'll enjoy that."

For a long time, he's quiet and expressionless and I assume—thinking about his last statement. Gripping the cigarette between his lips, he puffs like a locomotive chugging up a steep hill, the smoke trailing up toward the ceiling.

Five minutes pass and he hasn't uttered a word or even looked toward me. I start to speak, but he holds his hand up to stop me, and then stands and paces the floor.

"I don't know, maybe I am the devil," he finally says.

"At one time, I wasn't... wasn't like this. I have a name, Elwin Paul Smith, born June 4, 1965 in Cleveland... Cleveland Medical Center. I had parents, I was a normal kid. My father was a plumber, and my mother was a housewife. I had two sisters. I went to public schools and made decent grades and for two years, I even went to the University of Cincinnati and studied literature and then I quit. I couldn't stand it anymore."

DEATH stops pacing and stands in front of me, looking down. "You know, I was normal; people forget this," he says. Then, he tells his story.

IN HIGH SCHOOL, I was a loner. I had few friends. I know. You think, that's how the story always goes with freaks. I am a freak, but I wasn't then. I was the all-American kid. I wouldn't do drugs. I didn't listen to heavy metal. I didn't sit around watching tv all goddamned day. I read. That's all. Not horror. Or science fiction. Normal fiction. Salinger. Hemingway. Steinbeck. H.G. Wells. London. And even Dickens if I had the time. That's why I had no friends. None of the people I went to high school with read. That's why I had no friends. That's all. I wasn't a freak.

There was one day, I cut class, and I would've given anything to have had a friend or someone to talk to. I needed

to scream out what was inside my mind—help me please!—but I didn't. I kept it locked up tight inside me.

That day, I was in my own little world, wandering through Cleveland's downtown. The city's skyscrapers surged out of the ground around me like giant phallic symbols, like artificial mountains, and I walked in their shadows feeling small and insignificant. In this big city, I felt alone. All these people were around me, but I felt by myself, as if I were in another world, another dimension. I had cut class for a dumb, inexcusable reason: there was this guy that had been threatening to beat the shit out of me. He had no reason. I didn't even know him. I'd never done anything to him. I guess, he was showing me that he could control me and that it didn't mean anything that I was in the advanced classes. Everyday he terrorized me. I needed a day away from it all.

I wandered the town most of the day and then ate lunch at a small cafe, I remember I had a hot dog and baked beans. It wasn't healthy and it wasn't very good.

After the lunch, I stopped in a book store and browsed; this was my world. I would start at the A's and read every name and title, through to the Z's, occasionally, lifting one from the shelves and reading the description and if it interested me, I

...When she was asked if she knew that seventeen year old she had talked to in the bookstore was DEATH, she replied, "Yeah, I know. What he's doing isn't the bad thing that the media—you guys—make it out to be. He's doing what he feels he has to, you know? He was a good kid..."

tuned to the first page and read it. Sometimes, I knew it was something beyond my understanding—like James Joyce's Ulysses or anything by Thomas Pynchon. And other times, when I read the first line, and it made me finish the paragraph, I knew it was a book that would touch me and inspire me, make feel

like being alive.

That particular day, I had reached the E's and had picked up Ralph Ellison's The Invisible Man—because of the narrator's declaration of his invisibility in society—and was carrying it with me. I ended up reading three pages before I forced myself to stop and save it for later. I continued with the E's, and I noticed across the bookshelf there was blonde-haired, green-eyed bombshell of a girl, that looked college age. She was on the H's. I finished the E's and was halfway looking at the F's, but actually most of my attention was on this girl. I always looked at "book girls". You see, I thought that eventually I would meet my dream girl in a book store or the library or somewhere with books. My dream girl was intelligent and interested in reading. Where else would I look for such a girl, right? I was always aware of these "book girls", and I wanted to talk to them, but I lacked the courage.

Anyway, when I reached the G's, this college girl saw the Ralph Ellison book and said, "I read that for an American Lit class last semester. It'll make you think. It might make you angry. It pulls you into his world."

She talked to me, and I didn't know what to say. All day I'd been wanting someone—anyone!—to talk to me, and now, I had this beautiful college girl starting a conversation with me about a novel that I'd picked up, and I was speechless.

Finally, I said, "I read the first three pages. It seems to be pretty good."

"I noticed," she said, and then asked, "Have you read this?" She was holding up a paperback copy of Thomas Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge*.

I nodded. "It's good," I said. "Hardy reminds me of Dickens, but his books are shorter and a bit more complex."

She smiled. "I like Dickens."

"Me, too," I said.

I was in love. This is what I'd always been wanting all my pubescent life. I didn't care that she was at least three years older than me. It didn't matter to me.

And then she said, "You know, you shouldn't cut class."

She knew my age, and I felt let down. She'd never give the time of day to a high school kid, and I thought she was going to turn away and I wasn't going to ever see her again.

And then she said, "I guess, if you're going to go to a bookstore, it can't be all that bad cutting class." She was smiling that pretty smile again. "My name is Rica."

"I'm Paul," I said.

"Nice to meet you, Paul," she said. "You read a lot, don't you?"

I nodded.

And then we talked for an hour or more. She went to a community college in a small town near Cleveland, a political science major. She was twenty-one, and planned to be a corporate lawyer. Her favorite writer was Kurt Vonnegut, and she convinced me to buy his novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, which I never did read, unfortunately. In fact, I never talked to Rica after that day, even though we exchanged addresses and phone numbers.

We left each other at the store front. She offered to give me a lift home, but I declined. "I can't go home yet. It's only two. My mom will know that I skipped classes. She'd kill me."

Rica smiled and said, "I'd take you to lunch if I didn't have to be back for a three o'clock class."

"That's okay. When you're in town, give me a call," I said and then added, "I'll write you a letter."

She leaned toward me and kissed me on the cheek.

"Bye, Paul," she said, and then got in her car and left.

I was madly in love. Puppy love, I guess. I slid her phone number into the pages of *Slaughterhouse Five* and then began walking again, without a clear destination. Just walking.

That was my mistake, I guess.

Lost in my haze, I didn't think about where I was going, and I stepped into a wide alley, between a drug store and a clothing store, and I heard a scream for help.

My first impulse was to turn and run.

And yet, I couldn't. Instead I ran as hard as I could down the alley toward the scream and started to turn the corner, but on impulse slowed down.

I peeked around the edge and I saw two men fighting. One was a cop, he had the other man by the hair and was pounding his head into a concrete wall, over and over again, like he was trying to crack an egg. Again with instinct, I dodged behind a trashbin and watched, and tried to figure out what was going on. Maybe the man was a criminal and the cop was apprehending

him; by ramming the man's head into the wall? Maybe . . . but I didn't know. There was nothing I could do. Maybe I should've run, but I tried, and my legs wouldn't turn away. I couldn't run away. Seeing the violence was like watching a movie, only I was part of the action and couldn't get out of it. When the body went limp, the fucking cop was still rammin' his friend's skull into the wall. It was a goddamned bloody mess. I knew the guy was dead. He had to be. Finally, the cop dropped him and kicked him and . . . oh, I'll never forget this. He said, "LET JUSTICE RULE, let fuckin' justice rule." He laughed and kicked the man again.

That's when I noticed a black fog around the cop.

It was like a dark halo, surrounding him, outlining his shape. I'd never seen anything like this; but I knew what it was and I knew what it meant and I turned and ran.

The cop was bad, full of badness, like a rotten tomato turning black on the skin and losing its shape. The cop had murdered the other man, in cold malicious blood. The cop was evil. I felt it; deep, down inside, I knew that cop was a bad man.

When I got home, I realized that I had dropped the Ralph Ellison and Vonnegut books, and wouldn't have cared if they didn't have Rica's phone number and address in them.

When I returned to the spot the next day, the books were gone.

That happened when I was seventeen.

DEATH SITS DOWN and says, "After that, I kept seeing the black fog. Nearly everywhere I went where there was crowd of people, there was at least one person who I knew to avoid." Most of this has been confirmed (except the black fog), even the beating by the policeman, Sergeant Joseph McClintock, who was killed later that year by a drug dealer being apprehended. Incidentally, the police found the two books that Smith dropped, and they even contacted Rica Jefferson, who claimed that she had not given her address and number to anyone that day. Police had hoped that whoever owned the books (with Rica's number tucked in the pages) also saw the murder of J. Thomas Little, a criminal lawyer in Cleveland. The case was not pursued and was left unsolved. Rica Jefferson remembers the young Smith, and even says that she wanted to call him and warn him about the police. She didn't because she was scared. She had lied to the policemen to protect Smith, who evidently did see it happen. Smith and Ms. Jefferson never contacted one another, and Ms. Jefferson eventually forgot about meeting him in the bookstore. When she was asked if she knew that seventeen year old she had talked to in the bookstore was DEATH, she replied, "Yeah, I know. What he's doing isn't the bad thing that the media--you guys--make it out to be. He's doing what he feels he has to, you know? He was a good kid."

The fact that he was a good kid and good student has been reported time and time again. His two sisters refused to speak about him, but most of his teachers in school could only remember how intelligent he was. "Quiet though," Johnson Abbot, Paul's sophomore English teacher, said. "He never

answered a question unless he was called on. I can't remember him answering a question wrong." All of the teachers that were interviewed knew that Elwin Paul Smith had become DEATH. Many teachers said that they did not remember him as a student, claiming he was so timid and reserved that he was easy to forget. "When I found out what high school he went to," one woman, who asked to be anonymous, said, "the name haunted me for a few days until I looked in my old grade books and sure enough, there was his name and all of his perfect scores."

AND NOW, RISING from his seat again, DEATH lithely strides to the window and opens it and leans out. "Down there," he says, "down there, there's all types of evil, all levels of badness, all types of sin. This is an awful world we live in! This is a terrible world and NO ONE REALIZES IT BUT ME! NO ONE KNOWS BUT ME!" He's screaming now and his voice has physical shape and form and fills the room almost to the point of suffocation. "THEY'RE MURDERING THE WORLD, KILLING ONE ANOTHER, AND THEY DON'T SEE IT! THEY'RE FUCKING BLIND! I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!" He stops screaming and pulls his body back into the room and closes the window. For a long time, he stands still and then he sits down and sadly says, "Back then, I was a kid and didn't know any better." From inside his cloak, he pulls out a bottle of Early Times and halfway fills a paper cup. Swiftly, he tosses the shot of bourbon to the back of his throat. Then he pours another and says, "I suffered from depression. In college, I'd sit in front of the television and watch the news and cry, every night. The world I was seeing was terrible; my stomach would ache every time I heard about a child being killed; my head would pound for every bullet fired in all the world's wars. The world was mad. Do you understand me? It was lunacy. Craziness. It still is."

DEATH leans back and whispers, "I dropped out. Out of school. Out of my family. Out of society. Out of life. I couldn't take it anymore. I kept telling myself, 'No more, no more.'"

DEATH sips the bourbon and says, "I traveled south and found myself in a tiny little town called Cressy, in Kentucky. That's where I made a life for myself. A simple life. Without the world and its problems. Without television and newspapers. It was just a simple life in this small Kentucky village where nothing that happened outside the county boundaries really mattered. I was a farmland, for an apple orchard. The old couple who owned the orchard took me in as their own kin. Their only son had been killed overseas, while in the military, and I guess they gave me the love they would've given him. They were good people. They never asked questions about where I was from, never asked about my parents or family. I worked hard, learning from the old man about the land and how to take care of it. Everyday, from dawn 'til dark, except Sundays, I used my hands and made the land produce life. Beautiful, green, living life. The country air pulled my mind out of depression. All around me, I saw life and nothing else. On the farm, there was little badness to see. Very little at all. And I thank the

heavens for that peace."

DEATH's last sentences were spoken softly.

Looking toward the window, he drums his fingers on the edge of the armchair nervously. "The old couple that owned the farm," he says, "they died. First, the husband died of a heart attack; and then, three weeks later, the woman died of loneliness.

"They gave me their farm; left it to me in their will."

Death drinks from the bottle of bourbon.

And then, he tells how it began.

THE DAY WAS August 14, 1995, two weeks before harvest.

I was thirty years old. The old couple had been dead only eight months and I was still sad. I think, every time I walked through the rows of apple trees, I cried. It was an awful year.

That day, August 14, 1995, I spent the morning readying the cider press for production, even though cider wouldn't be made until the third week of September, if I survived all the work 'til then. I made a list of parts to be replaced on the press, and after lunch, I jumped in the old Ford pick-up and drove highway 89 into town and parked in front of Hargrave's Hardware Store. I left the list with Mister Hargrave and walked through Cressy to the courthouse, saying hello to everyone I met.

They all knew me.

At the courthouse, I'd planned on speaking with Sheriff Hankins about possibly cruising the Orchard's narrow, county road once or twice a night, during apple season to curb thievery. But the sheriff wasn't in.

"He's at the county court meetin' across the hall," the deputy said, "but he'll be back in an half-hour or thereabouts. Anything I can help you with?"

I shook my head and started to leave.

As I stepped out the door, across the hall in the meeting room, I heard an uproar of voices, and then one clearly rising above the others in a scream: "Goddamn you! Goddamn you!"

"Sounds like they're having a doozy of a meetin'," the deputy said behind me, and I turned around and he smiled. Then, I heard the door of the meeting room open, and I turned and saw the sheriff's head sticking out, and he yelled, "Zeb, get over here, quick! I need you in here. There might be trouble."

The deputy's face fell, as if trouble never happened in the county. "Watch things, Mary," the deputy told a secretary and then raced out of the office and crossed the large hallway.

A little concerned, I stepped out into the hall and stood next to the sheriff's office, watching the door to the meeting room and listening to the rising voices.

"My wife is dead!" the same voice screamed.

There was a whisper of other voices and then I heard the man yell, "Don't you see? Can't you fucking understand? This bastard KILLED MY WIFE!" There was anger in this voice: hatred and disgust and exasperation!

I was faced with the decision to leave and let it be, or keep listening. But there was no choice. You see, there were no roads for me, except going through that meeting room door. The pull—what pulls me everyday (right now!)—had begun its tug, and I carefully slipped through the door.

As soon as I opened it, a breath of hot air exploded in my face and my mind reeled, unbalanced. I looked about and I saw that the black fog filled the room; badness filled this room. I wanted to run. To turn away from this responsibility. But I couldn't.

I stepped into the room and stood staring around the meeting table, looking for the apex of badness. The fog seemed to thicken in one corner and I focused my eyes and saw a man whose picture had been in the Cressy Express several times. He was evil. Pure, real, unavoidable evil. Like the devil. He was the devil. NOT ME! This demon owned some kind of a chemical processing plant in town, and the articles in the paper were always saying how charitable he was with his money and his time.

"It's him that did it!" It was the man who'd been screaming about his wife. He was pointing to the demon. "My God! Don't you know what he's been doing?"

And I looked at the bad man.

I knew.

The visions roared in my mind and I saw a pipe with a clear harmless looking liquid gushing out into a stream; and I followed the stream along its path and it merged with a large rolling river, and I continued on, and I came upon a beach with people swimming in the river, and I dove into the water and followed it through the city pipes and into the sinks and tubs and washbasins of the community. There was an image of people drinking the water and bathing in it; and this image faded and another one followed, a chilling image: I saw a graveyard with dozens of gravestones, each of them were labeled THE BIG C. It was like a bad dream.

I'd never hated something or someone so much.

And I became angry and I tried controlling my anger, but I couldn't and I began screaming. I stepped through the black fog to the bad man and without knowing what I was doing, I said, "For your sins against Mother Earth and her children, you must die," and I reached down and grabbed his head and twisted. His spine snapped, sounding like someone cracking their knuckles, and I let go and his body slumped forward and fell out of the chair.

The fog disappeared.

Everyone in the courtroom was stepping away from me.

My anger faded and I walked out of the meeting room and out of the courthouse and out of town.

Already, I was being summoned for my next . . . execution.

IN SHERIFF HANKINS' report, Elwin Paul Smith, new owner of Hosler Apple Orchard, mentally snapped, and in cold blood (in front of God and everyone) killed Darron Rogers. Until Smith grabbed Rogers, no one noticed that he had come into the room. "Before we knew it," the sheriff reported, "the suspect seized the victim and, with his bare hands, broke his neck, like he was breaking a pencil. We were stunned. Myself and Deputy Orson failed to apprehend Smith as he left the courtroom (we didn't try), and then when we did pursue him, Smith was walking down the street. He passed his truck. We stood and watched him. We didn't

follow him. I did call the State Police and report the murder and asked for their assistance. In defense, I can only say that I was scared." That was written the day it happened. Now, when you ask the former sheriff about it, he replies, "I couldn't have stopped him. Nothing can stop him. Smith was crazy. Insane. He really was. That's why I lost the election."

When the State Police received Sheriff Hankins' call and were warned about Smith's strength, they blatantly ignored it. Trooper Samuel Holden caught up with Smith ten miles out of Cressy, walking toward Winchester. Trooper Holden pulled his car in front of him and blocked the road. He told Smith to stop, which he did. Trooper Holden then got out of his cruiser and cuffed him. Smith did not put up a fight at this point. But when Trooper Holden attempted to force him into the car, Smith refused. "The suspect would not bend down," Holden wrote in his report. "When I explained to him that he was being arrested for the murder of Darron Rogers, he said, 'It was only justice. He needed to die.' Then Smith picked me up and tossed me twenty three feet into a thicket at the side of the road. Smith held up the handcuffs and snapped them. It was nothing to him. I called in when I was able to."

Trooper Holden's call for backup was less than two minutes away. When the cruisers passed Smith, they stopped and again blocked his path. The two troopers were told by Trooper Holden that the suspect had strength beyond that of the normal man, and should not be apprehended without more force. But this warning was ignored, and they also were thrown twenty to thirty feet to the side of the highway. One of these troopers, Michael Ray, pulled his gun from the holster and shot Smith's left hip, hoping to wound him. It didn't. The bullet hit Smith and fell helplessly to the ground. More shots were fired to the same effect. Elwin Paul Smith was invincible.

His next victim was in Lexington, Kentucky, where he killed developer Arnold Spidder. His next in Cincinnati, and then his hometown, Cleveland.

It never stopped.

DEATH FLICKS THE ashes of his cigarette onto the floor.

"Seven years, I've been doing this," he says.

"Is it justice or murder? I don't know. They've tried to arrest me but I break their cuffs and their bullets will never hit me. I'm invulnerable. I hear in Detroit, they're constructing a wall around the city, but it won't keep me out. Nothing can stop me. Not even myself; God knows, I've tried, but I always end up with the blade in my hands, slicing life." Detroit is only one of a few cities that are taking the expense of building a wall. Also, Waco, Texas; Ashland, Kentucky; Hot Springs, Arkansas; Denver, Colorado; Portland, Maine; Sarasota, Florida. And many other cities have been discussing it. When DEATH comes across one of these massive constructions, it is not known what will happen: Will he tear a section of it down? Or will he climb it? Or will he turn and continue on somewhere else? No one knows, of course, but millions of dollars are being put into the walls with hopes that it'll keep him out.

"What sickens me, is that I'm a product of this society and they're trying to kill me," DEATH states, shaking his head. "I was created out of their lawlessness, for their misdeeds, for their inability to care for anything but themselves. They want to keep me out. Did you know that there are people that run from me? They go from town to town, because they know that I'm near, and they expect me to be coming soon. Everyone expects DEATH sooner or later." These people, which have been labeled by the media as "the DEATH Escapers", spend thousands of dollars to fly across the country when they know that DEATH is walking their way. It has been reported that Tom Howell, a Denver billionaire, bought a house in Sarasota, Florida so he could fly across the nation when DEATH crossed the Mississippi River, claiming that he wanted to keep at least two time zones between him and DEATH. Howell is also a major force behind the building of walls in those two cities. *"I expect that Mother Nature, my goddess, the force behind me, has other ways to deal with these people, maybe an earthquake, a hurricane, a tornado, lightning, or something. I don't know what. Whatever it is, I'm sure it will be a painful and torturous end for them. They need that."* DEATH says this with a smile, as if he knows several secrets.

"Mother Earth," he continues, *"is only that. Mother Earth. I can't explain anymore than that. I'm not sure you'd understand. I don't understand. I don't try to."*

Death lifts the bottle of bourbon and finishes it and takes a last drag on his cigarette before crushing it between his thumb and forefinger. *"I don't know,"* he says. *"I do believe in what I'm doing. Mother Earth chose me to do her will; to execute her justice; to save herself. And that's what I'm doing."*

"I'm tired, but I guess if I wanted to stop, I could. Like I said, I like murder. Mother Earth is letting me do what I want to do and that's kill the bad people of the world."

"Not everyone hates me, you know?" Death says. This is true, also. There is a major movement that glorifies DEATH's murders, calling it JUSTICE. The media has called them groupies. *"Sometimes, they walk with me, and fight the religious fools. They talk with me and bring me my liquor and cigarettes, the only real enjoyment that I get in the world. They know that I'm doing it for them. They have enough common sense to understand this."*

DEATH shrugs his shoulders. *"I had them make this interview with you because I wanted everyone-the world-to know that I was once normal. I am only doing what I have to."*

DEATH stands and says, *"You know the rest of the story. The world has found a new religion, based on their fears of me. They tell their children 'Behave or DEATH will take you away.'"*

"I'm their worst nightmare; and I'm real."

DEATH walks to the door and opens it and turns and says, *"I was normal; please remember that."*

And, he leaves.

SCARY MONSTER

By Lawrence Greenberg

some of the kids in school said there was a monster in the woods. they talked about it to intimidate the smaller, younger students. like me.

no one ever saw it.

but one night, using my keen sense of smell, I found a chewed-on ear wedged in a honeysuckle bush. later, with sharp hearing, I heard two lovers fornicating a few hundred yards from where I was crouching.

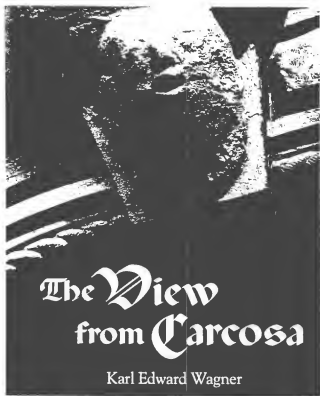
running through the woods on powerful legs, it didn't take me long to reach them. they didn't hear me-- my feet are padded-- and with large claws, I shredded their entangled forms. buried the remains. no trace left.

after I revisited my boy shape, I awoke, went to school the next day. no one knew anything.

the same kids kept haranguing me about the monster. I let them scare me. what did they know? nothing.

in a few years, they would be fat, bald and old. they would have nagging wives. they would work at boring jobs. they would father screaming kids. they would remember when they could actually have fun. they would wonder what had become of their youth.

if they lived that long.



SURVIVING THE YEAR'S BEST HORRORS

VES. SUDDENLY IT was that time of year again: the end of the year. Whilst the rest of you lot were gobbling down turkey, buying Christmas presents, ripping open the loot, getting pissed over New Year's, watching a billion football games, yer man Wagner was engrossed in reading a jillion horror stories in order to select the best of the best for **THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES: XXII** and have the book in DAW's clutches by the end of January and try not to miss the deadline this time, Doc, if that's convenient for you.

Made it by Groundhog's Day. A new track record. My brain hurts. I think I'm going blind. I'm developing pustulent sores on my hands from turning pages (I think).

This was my 15th ordeal as editor of YBH, having been preceded by Richard Davis and Gerald W. Page, both of whom had the good sense to cut and run. But has anyone seen either editor since? Could it be that...?

Never worry, yer man has decided to stay the course. I've lash myself to the wheel (kinky!) like yer old sea captain in **DRACULA**. And just in case they only find my blood-drained body, I'm leaving this tale of my adventures as a warning to the curious.

CHAPTER ONE: HOW IT ALL BEGAN. I was a naive theology student walking in New Orleans to a Temperance Union Rally with a sensitive young poet, David Drake, when suddenly a grizzled old man with a horrid gleam in his eye leapt from an alleyway and gasped Drake, exclaiming: "You are the chosen one!" Drake made a sign to ward off the evil eye, but I wasn't quick enough. In another moment, Page had scuttled off clutching the signed contract, giggling eldritchly, and I was sucking my bleeding thumb and fancying a dozen Sazeracs in the nearest low dive. The stripper had a surprise in store.

CHAPTER TWO: IT CREPT INTO THE MAILBOX.

Fifteen years ago the pickings were pretty slim for short horror fiction. The small press, with such notable exceptions as **WHISPERS** and **WEIRDBOOK**, wasn't really into horror; nor were the prozines and original anthologies. Poor old Doc had to haunt the newsstands, thumbing through slick magazines like **ROAD & TRACK**, **RUNNING TIMES**, **POPULAR SPERM**, **PLAYBOY**, **GALLERY**, **PENTHOUSE**, **HOT & HORNY BIKER GIRLS**.... "Hey, buddy! You gonna buy that magazine or just drool on it?" "Oh, I'm only looking at it for the fiction. I'll just have this copy of **TITS & GUNS** for the Dennis Etchison story."

Page had had to request original submissions when he was editor simply because there wasn't much reprint material out there to choose from. I decided to hold to the best-of-the-year cachet no matter what and returned all original submissions as they flooded in, explaining that to be eligible a story had to have had first publication elsewhere and during the year under consideration. This pissed off some writers, but it cut down the slush pile, and I learned the knack for finding horrors lurking in unlikely places.

More to the point, horror fiction began to blossom (maybe I should say "spore") in both the small press and the Big Press. Gobs of original anthologies and tons of small press publications. Yer man Wagner is certain that his job will now be easier. Lots to choose from now. A ghoulis smorgasbord. More fun than a Chinese menu. Did I say tons of small press publications? Current update: megatons.

Word got out that it's a good idea, if you have a really swell story that you think might be just the thing for YBH, to send to poor blind Doc Wagner a copy of the manuscript or a xerox copy of the published story. This is a good idea. Then small press editors decided to splurge and send yer editor free copies of their publications to review. This is a very good idea, since there are over a thousand small press publications out each week, and subscription costs would soon exhaust the five million bucks I get from DAW each year. Naturally this means a lot of reading, much of it from pages printed in finer print than that at the bottom of a Hollywood contract. You try finding bifocal mirror shades.

Undaunted, yer man plunges through it all, despite some other editors who had rather hoped to see a story that was promised to them. "Uh, Karl. You about got your story ready for **CHROME ZOMBIES** yet?" "Oh, that. Yes, well I was just reading the year's run of **MODERN NECROPHILIA**, and then I need to read **COLOSTOMY BAG SUCKERS**, and there's a D.F. Lewis story in the new **CORSET DIGEST**, but that won't take long to read. So. So. What was your anthology about?" Strange. He hung up. Where's that copy of **ENEMA REVIEW**?

CHAPTER THREE: WHAT'S GOING ON OUT THERE? After fifteen years at this job, yer man starts to see trends in horror fiction. He also starts to see things crawling on the ceiling, lurking in his fridge, and some other things that might not be real. Sometimes I see spots on my arms.

I've rambled on in this vein often enough before, but I'll do it again cuz it's my column, and if you've heard it before, then skip this chapter and go on to the: one about the conger

eels in strict bondage. When DAW recklessly got me to edit **YBH**, most of short horror fiction was to some extent written under the influence of H.P. Lovecraft. Yes, there were notable exceptions. However, the generic horror story was overlaid with stultifying prose leading to a final page of italics and exclamation points telling you what you knew from the first page. Next vogue maybe was Stephen King wannabes: kids cuss a lot, brand names appear a lot, and when in doubt, gross 'em out. Then came the ever popular splatter films (Hey, yer man isn't knocking this; he's planning to watch **BLOOD HARVEST** on Joe Bob's Drive-In Theatre tonight) which spawned an undending torrent of body fluids and happy mayhem--teaching us again that great lesson that teenagers who screw get hacked into chewy bits by an unkillable fiend. Never mind that most writers were virgins wanking with one hand while they worked the Apple with the other, and the nearest they'd come to seeing blood was when Mom cut up a chicken. They fainted.

Hell, I like to have a good time as much as the next dude. But yer man does get bored reading ten stories in a row where your expendable gets his cock and balls ripped off as he shits, pisses, comes, bleeds, and vomits all over. Horror fiction was pitching headlong into a boring morass of victims instead of characters, special effects instead of plot, graphic violence instead of solid writing, dead dull boring formula shit (*Ye Ed has dubbed this the Bilge Era*).

But, it got better. The best of the new writers got better with practice. Lots better. And younger. At least three of the writers in **YBH XXII** are younger than my '67 Stang. And they're good.

Maybe it's because the small press is now recognizing new approaches to horror fiction. Maybe it's because the writers are discovering that there's more than exploding eyeballs and sudden loss of sphincter control. Yeah, I still get a lot of covering letters "I discovered horror two years ago when I first read Clive Barker. Recently I have read a little Stephen King. I have since sold 137 stories to such publications as **GOTHIC ASSHOLE**, **SEMEN BRAIN**, **DEATH BY COCK-ROACH**, **ENTRAILS**, **ANIMAL LOVER**, **WARING BLENDER REVIEW** and **F&SF**. I hope you will enjoy the enclosed story about an ingrown toenail."

But, as I said, there is a growing evidence of maturity in horror fiction, both in writing skills and in theme. The trap in writing 137 stories in 2 years for the small press is that a writer may take his success, such as it is, for granted and see no need to develop beyond this stage. Friends and fellow small press writers have praised his work; if the Big Press markets reject it, it's the editors' fault. Two ways to handle this setback: rail against these insensitive editors and those coddled small press colleagues who have conspired to reach the major markets; or sit down, take a harder view of your own brilliance, and work to improve your writing. If all else fails, start your own small press magazine and sulk.

So then. What is changing in horror fiction? Lately, I have seen a trend toward writing stories which I can only categorize as strange and disturbing. That's a vague classifica-

tion, but such stories defy classification. It's not simply psychological horror or even surreal horror. Maybe it's mainstream fiction that becomes deranged. Often there is no fantasy element at all. Gore and violence may be present; sexual themes frequently are there as well. However, it's not the familiar slobber drool wanker crap. The effect is unsettling, and the direction the story takes is unpredictable. Yer man Wagner has read a jillion horror stories; he's even older than Stephen King. Usually old Doc gets two paragraphs into a story, has already guessed the rest (the serial killer is really a vampire!) and toughs it out because of a sense of duty. My goodness! Pot-smoking teenagers spending the night in a deserted house on the very same night that ten years ago... (fill in the rest).

More and more now I'm reading stories that are beyond easy categorization: thoughtfully written stories that explore new areas of horror. Cynical old Doc often hasn't a clue as to where the story is taking him; sometimes he has to start over and read it again. Strange and disturbing. Probably the finest recent example of this trend is Dennis Etchison's *The Dark Country*. He showed it to me after it had been bounced all across the Big Press. I read it, showed it to Stephen Jones and David Sutton at **FANTASY TALES**, urged them to print it. "No fantasy element." "Just print it." *The Dark Country* won both the British Fantasy Award and the World Fantasy Award (only work to do so) and formed the cornerstone of Etchison's collection, **THE DARK COUNTRY**, which finally brought his strange and disturbing fiction to the attention of a readership worldwide.

That's how I survive reading each year's horrors. There's always something new to find, if I keep plugging along. Could be I was a prospector in a previous incarnation.

CHAPTER FOUR: SO WHAT ELSE IS NEAT? Actually I was going to write a con report from last Halloween's World Fantasy Con, but I got sidetracked by the exotic Lynn Gauger, who likes to be called Salamander, and didn't pay much attention to the boring programming. Lynn is probably the only woman ever to have her photo in **LOCUS** (January, 1994) and **SKIN TWO** (#14) at the same time. Anyway, the con was held in Minneapolis, there were lots of fans and pros there, and we had a good time. Check it out in New Orleans this Halloween. I may be holding a contract for you.

So instead, I thought I'd mention a few of the small press publications I'd read for **YBH** that you might want to check out. Obviously I can't mention all of them (thanks anyway, editors!), and Mark already has a small press review column here, so I'll just drop a few choice and obscure titles on you.

Any vampires reading this? Then you need to check out **THE VELVET VAMPYRE**, a quarterly journal of The Vampire Society in England. Tina Rath, who writes a regular review column of current vampire fiction (and there's a lot of it), sent me the three latest issues for my reading pleasure and in case I might want to use a story from the magazine. First issue I open (XIX), there's--you guessed it--D. F. Lewis. Des sez

(Continued on page 61)

Forbidden Text Book Reviews

By Randy Johnston



DOMINATION

By Michael Cecilione

446 pp., \$4.50

Dec. 1993, Zebra

WHAT APPEARS, ON the surface, to be merely another vampire tale enshrouded with sex, **DOMINATION** rears its head straight into the realm of the revolting. Not since I stumbled across **THE GIRL NEXT DOOR** have I read anything that delivered the pain and suffering of innocents so severely. While the hapless victim in the latter book suffers for the benefit of a handful of sick neighbor kids, the suffering in **DOMINATION** reaches a monumental scale and is played out before celebrities and politicians. The grand elite are allowing the weak to

serve them, even in death.

The tale begins with The Vampire draining a young virgin of her life's blood. It would be the last of the children of Sicily to die for her. The blood had become thin over the centuries. The smell of freshly decaying America is now with her and there would be great pleasures ahead.

Hillary, the bored senator's wife, is pleased to see her faithful man-servant carry in a pretty young blond. Once strapped into the rack the girl is awakened and asked, "What does your husband do for a living?" "He's a plastic surgeon," she replies. "You're going to need him," Hillary says while applying the gag ball. After a session with the whip and a specially placed lit candle, the blond loses all will to resist.

Kelly is a writer for a New York tabloid called **NITELIFE**. Her next feature is a piece on S&M clubs. To get a peek inside this world she meets a dominatrix and secures a tryout at Captive Hearts, a place where mild to moderate levels of submission are played out. Kelly quickly assimilates the needed position of Master and finds a natural instinct for the job.

Many other characters fill the book: Rossi is a cop who happens to be Kelly's ex-boyfriend. Kelly's friend Gwen is a thrill-seeking lesbian. Ilana, rumored to be a relative of the infamous Countess Elisabeth Bathory, now rules as owner of the exclusive club Domination. Connor, a magician of sorts, is given the task of stopping the unstoppable—if he can figure it all out in time. And of course, a crazy mixed-up old priest, a vampire himself, is determined to stop The Vampire. What a crew!

The plot is simply how people and things traveling down differing paths will meet and forever be changed. The Vampire is immortal, therefore changing all to meet her debase desires. Kelly, the reporter, watches, remembers and seeks to understand the true meaning of dominance and why she enjoys it so. After a few vivid slaughters, their paths would cross when the crazy priest attempts to kill Kelly—in order to save her. This brings on The Vampire and more blood soon flows. It all winds up at Hillary's expansive coastal home. In attendance for the finale are Kelly, The Vampire, Hillary, Connor the magician, and a zombie vampire slave.

This may all sound like pure hokum. Well, it is, but it also is one well-told story. Kelly has successfully walked through the minefield of deviant subject matter and silly characters to deliver one of the better books I've read on S & M or vampires. (Not that I'm any type of expert in the field on S & M!) I do know that Cecilione has educated me in all I want to learn on the subject. The two-chapter sequence featuring the crucifixion of a young married couple is something I will never forget.

Ultimately it is up to the reader whether they are interested in the disturbing trappings of Cecilione's story. The S & M elements appear to have been well researched and carry much of the weight of the tale. Whether this makes the reader avert their eyes in disgust or they find the book a goofy but fun surprise depends on the level of other people's pain they can endure.

Michael Cecilione is married and lives on the Jersey Shore. He has written **SOULSNATCHERS** and **DEATHSCAPE**. His next novel will be **EASY PREY**, from Zebra Books.



SKIN

by Kathe Koja

389 pp., \$4.99

Feb. 1994, Dell

TESS EAJAC LIVES in a world of metal. She transforms scrap into odd sculptures. Her existence is minimal and artistic recognition is neither given nor wanted. Her entire focus is on the burn.

Then Bibi Bloss steps into her life and things change. Bibi is all energy, furious in need to express. Ideas are hatched. It would be a performance; a blending of Tess' latest metallic creations and Bibi's dance. Sharp, jagged sounds rip through the smoke-filled air as Bibi leads the troupe through the blood-spattered ritual.

Fame, of sorts, is immediate for the Surgeons of the Demolition, as they so name themselves. The troupe performs again and again, each time more audacious, more over the edge. Until Tess's now monstrous constructs become unmanageable during a frenzied, knife-welding dance, leading to the death of a troupe member. It is the end for the Surgeons, as well.

Bibi moves deep into the world of pain. Piercings, stickings, hookings, cuttings, blood-lettings. She is looking for bridges, paths, doorways. Tess retreats back to her metals. They love each other with a fierce passion, yet cannot get past their individual needs and desires. The fights are continual. They live together, they separate. Each time Tess sees Bibi, she notices change. Physical alterations, designed deformities. Bibi invites Tess to keep performance. She has found the final doorway.

Skin is a love story; character-driven with just enough plot to keep it from becoming nothing more than a series of arguments and mental torment. The trappings of industrial art are effectively invoked by using abstract descriptions, leaving the reader to picture exactly what these metal sculptures may be. In fact, the entire story plays like angry slaps of paint thrown on stainless steel. Mixing with hot grease, the paint drips to the ground to form...what? Anger and confusion fade away, not unlike my memory of this tale.

Kathe Koja's style is to be experienced. All jumbled-up phrases connected by a sea of commas. Snippets of conversation hidden in paragraphs of thought. She seems to be so intense on creating word-pictures, emotional thrusts at the reader, that she fails to see how dissatisfying the journey becomes. Others, more comfortable with Koja's style, may find this book to be hauntingly beautiful. I enjoyed her previous book, *Bad Brains*, far more.

Kathe Koja lives in Detroit with her husband and son. Her next book will be **STRANGE ANGELS**, due in May, 1994, from Delacorte Press.

in the issue was *Why Should I Cut Your Throat When I Can Just Ask You For The Money*. The author of this rubbish is Jeff VanderMeer, and the topic is the 1990 Georgia Fantasy Convention! I place exclamation point for the obvious reason; who short of VanderMeer's mom wants to read of his musings on an obscure sci-fi-convention convention three years gone in cob-webby memory? I most certainly could have done without his I-really-above-going-to-a-sci-fi-show-but-I-was curious attitude. And if I hear one more fan/neopro gush over the presence of Harlan Ellison I think I'll spew.

Well. As they say, you can't win 'em all. Therefore, I'll look forward to the next issue of *THE SILVER WEB*. 'Cause Ann Kennedy really has published some great stuff. Really.

Vlad The Impaler



VLAD THE IMPALER, Volume Three. 60 pp. Saddle stitched. Wayne Edwards & Tamara Price, eds. \$4.00. Published by Merrimack Books, P.O. Box 158, Lynn, Indiana 47355-0158.

THIS WAS AN interesting lit le read, for several reasons. Foremost of all, that the small press can support something as limited as the third in a series of anthologies containing stories featuring or about Vlad "The Impaler" Tepes.

By now, all we horror fans know the legend of the Transylvanian peer who vanquished the Turks and stuck everyone he didn't like on pointed sticks. So, there really is no reason to belabor the obvious.

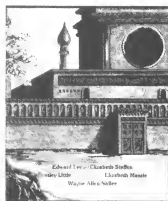
However, what really surprised me about this collection was that I liked it! Shades of the early seventies! It was almost like reading one of the Howard-inspired zines of my impetuous youth, when little mags like *MIDNIGHT SUN* and *WHISPERS* were publishing such folk as Karl Wagner and David Drake. There's some really ripping good yarns here. Stuff like *Cries in the Wind* by Kimberly Wade, *Watching Shadows* by Joshua Waterman (this kid is good), and *Blood And Fire* by Stephanie Andrews. All of this is fine, strong fantasy stuff like grammar used to read.

But the best of the lot, and a good reason to buy this book, is the two page poem *Promised*

The Land, And The Fruits Thereof by Steve Sneyd. I never have forgotten his *A Fir One* and *Too Far Behind Gradina* both for the grasp of language and the depth of his imagination. This short piece displays both qualities.

All in all, I found *VLAD* to be a nice little diversion.

Palace Corbie



PALACE CORBIE Volume II, Issue 2. 196 pp. perfect bound. Wayne Edwards, ed. \$7.95 from Merrimack Books, P.O. Box 158, Lynn, Indiana 47355-0158.

PERHAPS I'M JUST too damned critical this month. I had heard lots of good things about *PALACE CORBIE* and was really pleased when Mark tossed this one to me to review. With almost 200 pages, it's certainly quantitatively a good deal. But, again, I was disappointed in the level of fiction here, especially considering the numbers of shots made in search of the target.

For me, the greatest disappointment is seeing a story by an author whose work I truly admire, and finding that the featured story is below that author's ability. Such is the case here. I immediately turned to page 117 to read Elizabeth Massie's *Dance of the Spirit Untouched*. This lead-paged affair was about as surprising as a jack-in-the-box. Well, at least I know she's human, now.

Similarly, I went next (it was a close tug-of-war) to Wayne Sallee's *Don't Last Minute*. This one was better, since it was at least fast-paced and interesting. Wayne seems to have a love/loathe relationship with Chicago, and it really shows and shines in this vignette. However, as powerful as this was (like an expected, but unavoidable, slap in the face), I was left feeling let down by the writer. I wanted a real story, but got only a brief, if brilliant, flash of emotion.

Most of the fiction here is what I would call deadpan. It's as if the writers have just thrown up their hands and admitted that they can't really scare us, that too many others have done it before them and they're just plain out of ideas. Representative of the whole package would be the predictable, tired stuff delivered up by the likes of Sean Doolittle, Edward Lee & Elizabeth Steffen, Lucy Taylor, and the terribly boring Mr. Bentley Little. The real pisser about this is that all of

these writers are technically proficient. They know how to tell a damned story; they just haven't told us a damned GOOD story.

The closest anyone of the authors present came to doing the job was S. Dambrook Colson, of all people. His offering here, *Mother's Day*, was as good as anything I've seen from him, and it's only that he drops the ball and wastes his maturing ability with a predictable plot. Still, this is the first sign that I've seen that the oft-published Mr. Colson might prove himself to be a writer worth looking for.

This issue of *PALACE CORBIE* does have some near misses, and none of the stories are really bad, but I can't recommend it.



LOCURA BARATA, by Lorin Emery. 90 pp. \$5.00. Published by Merrimack Books, P.O. Box 158, Lynn, Indiana 47355-0158.

LORIN EMERY IS a prime example of a maturing writer just on the verge of making the transition from fan writer to professional. I've seen Emery deliver some hefty duds in my reading, but more and more often he is landing just outside the bullseye. Any day now, I expect to be knocked out by this writer.

In this anthology, we're buying four stories which range from the witty (but predictable) *Reconstruction*, to the overlong (and predictable) *Maia*. The people at Merrimack have also published for us two other (predictable) stories to fill out this anthology. I have read a recent story from Emery that was every bit of a professional calibre, but it ain't in *LOCURA BARATA*. Once Lorin gets three more of that kind of story between covers, I hope to see them collected so that I can recommend their purchase by this column's readers.

If you enjoy seeing an author who is on the verge of turning the corner, then buy a copy of *LB*. But if you want to read a really fine anthology from Emery, then I fear you'll have to wait another year or so.

A Graveside Chat

By Pam Chillemi-Yeager

Interview with William G. Raley, Editor and Publisher of AFTER HOURS



WILLIAM G. RALEY, of *AFTER HOURS'* fame, has been reliably putting out an award-winning product year after year, and has surpassed the 20th-issue mark—a feat not often accomplished in the financially unstable, come-and-go world of the small press. William tells about his accomplishments, past and present, and speculates on what is to come with writer Pam Chillemi-Yeager....

PC-Y: Who is William G. Raley, the editor and the man, and what motivated him to begin *AFTER HOURS*?

WGR: Probably the most eclectic, enigmatic person you'll ever know. My interests are extremely varied, from feminism to astronomy, standup comedy to chaos theory. I've sold short stories, poetry, humour articles. I make my own calendars and Christmas cards. Someday I'll sell novels and cartoons. I don't read the paper and rarely watch TV. I've stopped telling people I'm married to Lita Ford since they've started believing me. I started the magazine to make sure the REALLY weird stuff would be published. And to become better known in the industry. Well, been there, done that.

PC-Y: *AFTER HOURS* has just marked its fifth anniversary. You have never missed an issue, nor have you ever been late in releasing one. To what do you attribute both this longevity and reliability?

WGR: We're not only proud of putting out issues on time, we're obsessed with it. I put the rest of the world on hold (except for going to work, plus some eating and sleeping) during the two weeks or so each issue goes from stories on a hard disk to camera-ready 11" x 17" sheets mailed to the printer. As for longevity, how time flies when you're living in a fantasy world!

PC-Y: Who are your personal influences in both writing and publishing (whom do you read, admire, emulate)?

WGR: My favourite authors are Tanith Lee, H.P. Lovecraft and Clive Cussler. Dave Silva's *HORROR SHOW* most influenced the look of *AFTER HOURS*.

PC-Y: You have stated the magazine title is a double entendre for the time frames in which the stories take place, as well as your editing/publishing hours. Tell us more about your love of the dark and the important role it plays in the magazine.

WGR: Night is when the interesting stuff happens. Such incidents can be wondrous or horrifying or both. People's true selves emerge.

PC-Y: You have consistently distinguished yourself by publishing compelling, award-winning fiction which is minimal in the slash and gash department. Was this a conscious decision on your part at the start-up of *AFTER HOURS*?

WGR: Definitely. Many stories of that ilk are written to cover up a lack of talent. People are desensitized to violence. Why should they buy a copy of *AFTER HOURS* if it has the same content as the evening news? My favourite episode of *MIAMI VICE* was "Shadow in the Dark," about a house burglar; no drugs, no car chases, no guns fired, no one injured; it was all psychological and VERY entertaining. Many writers of horror stories forget to put in the suspense; these people should be forced to watch the baby carriage scene in *THE UNTOUCHABLES* until they get the message.

PC-Y: There seems to be a growing number of hardcore horror magazines emerging. Do you view this as a trend, and if so, what do you think of it?

WGR: Hey, art imitates life. I don't think the level of violence has changed through history, but technology has resulted in one person's violence making a far greater impact. I'd like to see more stories written about what life COULD be like. There'll always be violence and injustice, but that's not to say the common man can do nothing about it. Look at the Earth First! people. I'm not saying I

support what they're doing, but they're certainly being creative.

PC-Y: *The small press is often a hotbed of controversy, rife with feuds and ego clashes. You have assiduously held yourself above the fray. How so, and what is your take on the brouhaha?*

WGR: Assiduously? What's that mean? Oh. Yes, there are real and flagrant abuses of the editor/writer relationship, but I think most quarrels are over pieces of work (be it magazine or story) that people won't remember next decade. Or next month. Of course, it's hard for someone to see that when it's THEIR work, myself included. Twenty years from now these people will wonder why they didn't spend all that time editing or writing. We've had arguments with writers, but few lasting ones. When you send galleys and pay on acceptance, you avoid a lot of grief.

But if an editor doesn't piss off SOMEONE, he's probably not doing his job. Really.

PC-Y: *Shifting focus, what inspires you when you are facing the slush pile or a layout?*

WGR: I don't find looking at the slush pile inspiring. Reading it is just something that has to be done. Sometimes I read forty stories in one sitting and they all suck. Other times I read half a dozen and they're all diamonds in the rough. I read the slush pile in various places: Josie's bar, the Harbor House Cafe, at the beach, at work during lunch, on the sofa. Even in bed.

PC-Y: *What goes into the story selection process (what do you look for; what is the staff's role, etc.)?*

WGR: We all read the slush pile. Holly assists with borderline stories and with which stories go in which issue. Both Holly and June do book reviews. Naturally, I read all acceptances, since I write the checks! As for the stories themselves, the cream really does rise to the top; you can tell by the end of the first paragraph if someone can write. There's seldom a problem with buying too many of one type of story, since we avoid common themes like the

plague. Out of 238 stories we've bought to date, ONE has been about Halloween and TWO about werewolves; I can't think of any about ghosts; the staff seems to like vampire stories, though (I wonder about the staff sometimes).

PC-Y: *You have come to be known as an approachable, congenial editor. What is your philosophy regarding the editor-writer relationship?*

WGR: It definitely helps that I'm also a writer. Treat people like people and it's amazing how they respond. It all comes down to letting me do my job and letting them do theirs. I thought ALL Californians were approachable.

PC-Y: *What do you find most rewarding; conversely, what has been your biggest source of frustration?*

WGR: Most rewarding is discovering new writers and putting out a creative

the final issue. It's time for all of us to move on. We don't intend to go out quietly, though. Anybody who's anybody will be published here by then. Well, almost.

PC-Y: *Now that everyone's jaw is unhinged, would you like to offer a few words as to how you would like the magazine, and William-the-editor, to be remembered?*

WGR: The magazine that was out where the buses don't run. That was as dependable as the sunset. One for whom the loyalty of the staff, readers and writers bordered on fanaticism. At the risk of sounding egotistical, I don't think the magazine can be replaced. Others publish stories the quality of ours, but no one else publishes AFTER HOURS stories. As of #19, we've published 78 short stories by women, something few small press mags have

done (if any). We published the first interviews of Nina Kiriki Hoffman and Nancy Kilpatrick. And then there's the first sales, including one by a promising writer named Pam Chillemi-Ycager.

As for myself: When I DO become famous, I intend to remain so a lot longer than

fifteen minutes.

PC-Y: *That's wonderful, William.*

Thanks for a great interview.

AFTER HOURS may be ordered from editor William G. Raley, at PO Box 538, Sunset Beach, CA 90742-0538. Price: \$4.00 per issue, \$14 annual subscription.

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We've had arguments with writers, but few lasting ones. When you send galleys and pay on acceptance, you avoid a lot of grief. But if an editor doesn't piss off SOMEONE, he's probably not doing his job. Really.

product that will (hopefully) outlive me. We've published dozens of first sales. Two of these have ended up in YEAR'S BEST HORROR. Sometimes first sale authors crawl back into the woodwork. Most frustrating is not having time to write, plus being reminded daily how good the competition is! Good writers sending us bad stories is also no fun.

PC-Y: *Does Panther, the AFTER HOURS mascot, have anything to say?*

WGR: William, you've been sitting at that stupid PC for hours! Are you wearing your heart out on your sleeve AGAIN? What, an interview--really? Oh, OK. Hurry up. Just remember, do you want me to behave around your dates or not?

PC-Y: *What are your (sob, snuffle) future plans for the magazine?*

WGR: Rumours of our death are NOT exaggerated. **AFTER HOURS** #25, to be published in January 1995, will be

Promise Me Anything

By Michael Gust



Wartman
'94

SHIMMERING BEADS OF virgin sweat pebbled every exposed inch of me and Bobby Besaw's skin. Huge drops sluiced out from our eyebrows, from under our arms and knees, joining into rivulets that carved their swift way to the hayloft floor.

Keeping my eyes locked on Bobby's cotton-covered tent pole, I flicked my tongue out and sucked a salty drop off my upper lip. I knew he was expecting me to back down any minute--Laurie and Angelique both had--but he was in for the biggest surprise of his stupid, twelve-year-old life.

I pulled my dress up another inch.

"G-go on. Higher," Bobby stammered. He shifted to accommodate his hard-on and motioned with his free hand what I should do. The ragged hem of my dress rose an inch, then another, then stopped just a whisper short of THERE.

"Now you, Bobby," I said. "Yank 'em down when I say so, so that we finish together."

"Yeah, sure. Okay." Bobby's voice was thick with expectation.

"On three. And remember. You promised."

Somewhere overhead a bored wasp droned its monotone buzz. Heart pumping double-time, I closed my eyes, counted to three and lifted.

Warm air curled up between my legs and another drop of sweat birthed itself on my inner thigh. Even with my eyes shut, I could feel Bobby's gaze burning into me. Shivering a little from the thrill of it all, I took a deep breath and opened my eyes.

Bobby was staring in what I assumed to be wondrous amazement; his eyes were wide and intense, his jaw was slack, his mouth a black, gaping hole. My own eyes slid crotch-ward, eager for their first peek of forbidden boy territory, but Bobby's shorts still clung griggishly to his bony hips.

"You lying little--" I started.

"Lettie Sue Dawson, if you're up there with Bobby Besaw again, you're in some deep shit!"

Momma was coming up the hayloft ladder.

Now Bobby had sworn he would meet me inch for inch, and here I was, naked to his gobbling eyes, the crown of Momma's head already visible over the top of the hayloft ladder, and all I had to show for it was a view of Bobby's bulging, gray Jockeys.

As hell red waves of fury crashed within my heart, and tingly Momma fear skittered down my spine, something deep inside my brain stirred to life. It whirled around the inside of my head, impatient and eager to leap, like a caged jaguar eyeing a dripping piece of meat dangling just outside its cell. Knowing I was doing wrong--very wrong--and not caring anymore, I let IT out. The hayloft jerked and sizzled and then dissolved into a million pin points of colored light. As it slowly reformed I watched the elastic band around Bobby's waist expand outward on its own. The Jockeys spun down over his stiff weeny, over his knobby knees, and gathered like a soft cloud around his ankles.

I could only smile as Momma and Bobby's screams wound around each other like two lust-locked black snakes twisting out their passion across a steamy stretch of Highway 51.

THE TELEPHONE RANG three times before Momma picked it up. "Hi, honey. Yeah, she's right here. No, I don't think that would be a good idea. Right, same thing as with Duncan. No. I'm sure. You didn't see that Besaw boy like I did. No, he's fine. Okay, I'll see you there. Bye now."

A soft plastic click ended the conversation and the house filled with Momma's silence. Meaningful silence surged down the long hall and splashed up against my closed door; little streams of it pushed into my room where they slid to a sibilant hush in the darkness under my bed. I turned over on my stomach and lowered my head over the edge of the mattress until I could see underneath. I puffed up sweaty cheeks and blew hard, sending little gray dustballs spinning around in tight circles.

I was a freak.

I knew it. Momma and Daddy knew it. And my big brother Duncan knew it too--he had learned the hard way, peeking in on me in the bathroom a couple of years ago. That had been the first time I had let the thing in my head out and I hit him way too hard. Poor Duncan spent most of that summer sitting on the back porch staring at his dirty toenails before he snapped back into shape. I wasn't evil or cruel, I just had this THING inside me, sort of like an extra, extra bad temper, with a life all its own.

Ever since the incident with Duncan, Momma and Daddy have watched me nervously, waiting, I suppose, for that final irreparable act that would condemn me forever. And my little indiscretion with Bobby Besaw had obviously brought me one notch closer.

"Lettie Sue?"

Momma was just outside the door and for a second I had the impression that she was afraid to barge in on me. I smiled, thinking how it served her right and waited, making her call out again.

"Lettie Sue? You in there?" Her words jittered with barely suppressed fear.

"Yeah, Momma."

"You come on now. It's time to go."

THE AIR IN the Buick was liquid heat. I propped my feet up on the dash and bounced my knees together so that a warm breeze scooted up between my legs. I felt suspended and unreal, a side effect I always experienced the day after. Sun-scorched August fields slithered past my window, an alien landscape writhing under my gaze. As I slid my eyes to the left, Momma's knuckles paled over the steering wheel. She was bringing me along because she was afraid to leave me at home; afraid to lock me up and afraid to let me wander free.

As we crested the last hill before Cooperidge the tops of the carnival tents came into view. We parked in a field of freshly cut clover and, with Momma holding my hand tight, headed for the fairgrounds gate.

THE THREE B's sat butt to butt under the SunKist Lemonade tent. Beatrice, the mailman's wife, Bonnie, who worked at the IGA and Momma, who's real name was Wilberta but who everybody called Bertie. I squirmed on the picnic table

bench, thinking how the glow of the light coming through the yellow tent made everyone look slick and waxy.

"Lord, but today is gonna be a scorcher," Bonnie said, tugging at her pantyhose.

"Last year was just as bad, hon." Aunt Doris was always the expert on everything.

"Well if it's gonna rain--" Momma started.

Before she could finish her forecast, Ellie, Rose and Clair Applegate appeared in the tent entrance and headed right for our table. Momma fluttered her long fingers at me, indicating that I should give up my seat. I slid down into the sawdust at her feet, and soon the soothing weave of the women's voice lulled me to sleep. I dreamed I was floating behind a thick pane of mirrored glass. Everyone I knew was on the other side and, though I screamed and pounded the back of the mirror with bony little fists, no one could see or hear me. The harder I pounded the more they seemed to ignore me. Suddenly my fists sank into the mirror up to my wrists, then to the elbow. Deeper and deeper I went, knees, belly, face and finally my butt, like a slow face-first slide into a tub of too hot water. Just as I disappeared into the molten black glass I awoke.

As I had slept, my legs had worked themselves under the edge of the tent and out into the hot sun. I lay very still, feeling the tickle of the hot rays on my bare flesh and the creepy crawl of flies dancing on my ankles. Somewhere above me Momma was droning on about a third cousin, twice removed, on Daddy's side. For the moment she had forgotten all about her little burden. Two quick movements and I was outside, squinting up into an electric blue midday sky.

I sprinted for the midway, my overlarge, hand-me-down dress wrapping around my knees about to trip me, figuring any minute to hear Momma's shrill voice reeling me back. It didn't and soon I stood at the edge of a grassy slope, staring down the long hollow at the Nelson Brother's Entertainment Extravaganza.

Year after year, ever since I could remember, the Nelson Brothers had set up here the same way. At the top of the hollow were the big rides: the vicious, gut-wrenching Hammer, the frenetic Bumper Cars and Whirly-Gig, the Merry-Go-Round, the Mini-Mad Mouse and the Ferris Wheel. Further down were the usual shabby cluster of rigged gaming booths. And way down in the trees, at the very bottom of the hollow, separated from everything else like a couple of bad relatives at a family reunion, were those perennial favorites, the House of Horrors and the Kootchie tent. Sex and death, tucked away in a grove of ancient oaks.

I slid down the bank and headed straight for the Hammer. As this was considered the roughest ride on the midway, there was never much of a line. The guy running it was slouched in a rickety lawn chair reading an old copy of True Detective. He had a sleeveless T-shirt stretched tight over his bunched-up beer belly and a tattoo on his upper arm that read "Saline." As I handed over my one and only dollar, he flicked the dangling ash from his cigarette, nodded blankly, and motioned me on board. I climbed into the cab and the

Hammer began to swing, slowly at first and then faster and faster until it was spinning in a full circle. The centrifugal motion pushed all the blood up into my head and soon the sound of my screams and the creaking Hammer mixed together into a single, piercing whine. I closed my eyes and pretended that I was zinging through space in a big rocket ship, heading for a new world, leaving this one behind. There would only be people there like me and they would make me their absolute sovereign ruler and I would send them back to Earth to capture Bobby Besaw and bring him to me to be my consort. I would be gracious and forgiving and he would love me forever.

The Hammer wound to a stop with a reluctant grind of metal on metal and I stepped off, dizzy and nearly sick. The sound of my name formed overhead in the hot August air and I looked around with a fright, afraid that Momma had caught me already. Instead, I found myself looking directly into Laurie Aughton's oversized pink and green sunglasses.

"Hey, Laurie," I said. "What's up?"

Laurie was staring at me like I was some kind of new bug.

"Laurie?" I said again. "What's wrong?"

Laurie's mouth began to move and soon actual words spilled out. "Angelique told me that Eebby told her that you did it with him and your Momma caught you and locked you in the smoke house still naked."

I swallowed hard, realizing that my reputation was in grave danger. "No way, Laurie. After she sent Bobby packing she locked me in my room for the rest of the day." I flipped my long hair back over my shoulders. "And I did not do it with that teeny peckered little liar."

"You saw...it?" Laurie's dark eyebrows rose up over her plastic frames.

"Yeah I saw it," I said, starting down the midway. "It looks like a little vienna wiener growing out of his belly. I swear, I just don't know what all the fuss is about." I stomped past the Ferris wheel, past the Merry-Go-Round and into the crowded gaming area. Laurie caught up to me at the ring toss booth.

"Give the lady a dollar, Laurie," I demanded.

Laurie hesitated, then dropped a bill onto the counter. A bored girl about my age took it and gave me three faded wooden rings. I tossed the first one. Not even close. The girl watched me idly, working something in the back of her mouth with her tongue.

"What else did Angelique say?" I asked real casual-like.

"Nothing."

The second ring wobbled around the lip of the milk bottle and spun off. I narrowed my eyes. "Come on, Laurie."

Laurie pretended not to know what I was talking about.

"Laauriiiiieee."

She heaved a false sigh. "You sure you want to know?"

When I didn't answer she sighed again and, leaning close, whispered into my ear. "Angelique said that she was gonna meet Bobby here at the carnival. She said that after--you know--Bobby didn't like you anymore. She said he

said she was a lot prettier anyway and that he had decided that he liked her best of all of us."

I tossed the third ring. It was way off and I knew it was going to miss. Suddenly Laurie, the booth and the ring toss girl dissolved into a curtain of buzzing color. When everything snapped back the ring had changed course and was jammed down tight on the back row center five dollar bottle. As the canny girl handed over a fin, I tried to mask my alarm. She gave me a weird look and turned to examine the bottle and ring. I whisked Laurie away from the booth, bought her and me a couple of sno-cones and gave her back her dollar.

We sat down in the shade of a big oak next to the House of Horrors, panic hollowing out my legs and belly.

"How come they get away with calling that thing a house when it ain't nothing more than two big old semi trucks hooked up at the rear?" Laurie asked, pointing over at the House of Horrors. I sucked the cold ice down in big lumps and stared at the faded scenes of haunted houses, twisted oaks and lumbering zombies painted on the metal sides.

When I didn't answer, Laurie leaned over into my face. "God, Lettie," she said. "You're shaking like a leaf."

"It's just the ice," I said.

But it wasn't the ice at all, no way. It was the single thought that spun around and around inside me.

The thing in my head had leapt out unbidden--all on its own!

That had never happened before. Not with Duncan and not with Bobby. Recorded roars and squeals blared out from the rusty old PA speaker above the funhouse entrance. I cleared my throat and turned to Laurie.

"Laurie, did Bobby say anything else?"

"Hub?"

"Did he mention anything funny happening yesterday, other than, than...you know?"

"No. You feel okay, Lettie? You look awful pale."

I dumped my melted sno-cone juice on the ground. A crowd of older kids came out the exit of the funhouse, giggling and waving their arms. The boys pretended to head for the Kootchie tent even though they were too young. Their girlfriends pulled at their shirts and hollered their names in too-loud voices.

Then, like a rouge echo, I heard Momma calling my name from the top of the midway. Oh God, not now. Please not now.

"Hey, Lettie, ain't that your Momma calling?"

I shook my head, looking around desperately for a place to hide. Then I realized that it was right in front of me. "Laurie," I said, pointing over at the House of Horrors. "Let's go in. My treat."

"Naw." Laurie shook her head and tipped the cherry-stained paper cone to her red lips. "It's boring," she

mumbled through a full mouth. She crumpled the cone into a ball and tossed it into the woods behind us. "It smells bad and besides, I got sick in there last year."

I glanced back up the midway. "Fine," I said. "Be that way. I'm going in, though." Momma's voice called out again. She was getting closer. Laurie raised her eyebrows in an unspoken question.

"Promise not to tell?" I asked.

Laurie looked away and shrugged. I knew how she hated to lie.

"Laurie. Please?"

Though she wouldn't meet my gaze, she finally nodded. I hurried over to the funhouse entrance, bought my ticket, and went inside.

LAURIE WAS RIGHT about the boring part. The House of Horrors wasn't scary at all. I think its main attraction was the promise of the unknown, the fact that all these people were walking around in the dark thinking something might happen.

I stopped a few steps in and breathed deeply, savoring the exquisite perfume of grease, popcorn, paint, spilled soda

and cool darkness, suddenly glad that Laurie hadn't come along. I moved slowly, lingering at torturous switchbacks, crouching in dark alcoves, watching people pass through the darkness like little lost ghosts. I sat back in an especially deep, dark pocket and closed my eyes. A peaceful feeling spread through me like back at the lemonade tent and I drifted.

I imagined Bobby and me in the hayloft, but now it was different and Bobby had kept his promise. Momma would never find us out and we were together in the hay, holding each other so tight that our eyelashes flickered against each other's cheeks. I was on the edge of dropping off into real sleep when:

"Come on, Angelique. I said I liked you best."

"Stop it, Bobby! Don't you think you can pull that shit on me just because that slutty Lettie Sue lets you."

Bobby whispered something I couldn't hear and Angelique giggled. Sudden tears rose against the back of my eye lids. I wanted to run away, away from the funhouse, away from the carnival and Momma and Daddy and Duncan and Bobby and Cooperidge.

Before I could move they were right in front of me, still laughing and giggling. I squeezed further back into the darkness, figuring to make my break after they passed. But Bobby picked that moment to poke Angelique in the ribs and, of course, she jumped right at me.

As she came into my corner I could feel her body heat. I pressed backwards against the rough plywood wall, trying to make myself as little as possible. Suddenly, I felt a stirring in my head. I fought it hard, but part of me wanted it to break

...As hell red waves of fury crashed within my heart, and tingly Momma fear skittered down my spine, something deep inside my brain stirred to life. It whirled around the inside of my head, impatient and eager to leap, like a caged jaguar eyeing a dripping piece of meat dangling just outside its cell...

out and wreak havoc. For a second I felt myself splitting in two. The corridor began to go soft around the edges, and as I opened my mouth to warn Bobby and Angelique the wall behind me gave way, pitching me backwards into the darkness.

I tumbled into a small room, the panel I had dislodged clicking shut behind me. Bobby and Angelique were too busy cooing and giggling to hear anything. The tightness and buzzing in my head faded as they moved on. I pushed at the door but it refused to budge. I pounded and hollered but no one heard me. After two broken fingernails and a crying fit, I gave up.

It suddenly dawned on me that I was in some kind of maintenance or storage area. Overhead, light filtered through a filthy, metal-meshed window. A broom and mop slouched in a corner. A bucket of spare parts lay packed in grease. As I bent down and poked at the black jelly, a face appeared out of the dim. I shrieked and jumped backwards. For the first time in my life, something in the House of Horrors had scared me.

I made myself look again and saw, all covered with dust and grit, a witch's mask. I picked it up. It had a lopsided, broken hat dangling perilously from the top. I put it to my face and peered out through tiny, drilled out eye holes. I remembered Daddy saying that at one time they used real people in here instead of the silly, fake contraptions they have now.

The witch mask fit so perfect that when I pulled my hands away it stayed. That was when I saw the side tunnel. It had been there all along, of course, but in my fear and panic I had missed it. Still wearing the mask--it made me feel better, somehow--I started down the narrow passageway that ran parallel with the main one. Shrieks and moans came through the thin plywood walls, some recorded and some real. I had to constantly duck under and climb over a jungle of rods and gears and belts and cogs that were running the ghosts and rubber hands and skeletons that were jumping around on the other side. I felt like a spy, like a secret watcher and little thrills ran up and down my spine. I didn't feel trapped and the need to flee was fading.

Small slots had been sawn every ten feet or so into the walls and covered with pieces of black velvet. At a wide place I moved one of the little curtains aside. Someone's face was just beyond and I reached my hand out and brushed a rough, whiskered cheek.

"Jesus H. Christ!" a man hissed. "That sure felt real!"

I cackled like a witch and, feeling suddenly giddy, squeezed his companion's full breast.

"Ricky!" she cried out. A light slap was followed by mild protestations of innocence, then giggles and guffaws. Stiffing a second cackle, I moved on.

I was somewhere near the end of the funhouse when I came to the graveyard.

This had always been my favorite room. It was the biggest too, maybe twelve feet by twelve feet. Gravestones, lit up with red and purple lights, slanted at gravity-defying angles.

A trio of shabbily costumed zombies jittered up and down from opened graves on welded metal armatures and big, furry spiders clung to thin webs that covered a central massing of stones. I dropped to hands and knees and, easing out through an access door, hid behind one of the rear markers. Now that I could leave anytime, I wasn't in such a hurry.

My eyes were used to the interior dim by now and I could see that the back of the gravestone was just another piece of plywood and on it was scrawled the words, "I fucked Suzy here. 8-19-71".

As I watched all the people file through, I wondered who Suzy was and why she had once let some guy do it to her in such a place. I imagined the skinny little ring toss girl in here on her back, the guy from the Hamner pumping away between her legs with the corpses jiggling all around, and the red and purple lights washing over their sweating bodies. Suddenly, in my imagination, it was me and Bobby instead, except he was older, bigger. A strange lassitude overcame me. As I imagined our bodies joined at the hip, sensations of warmth boiled over my belly and groin. I opened dream eyes and looked up at my lover. Instead of Bobby, it was one of the graveyard zombies. I opened my real eyes in groggy alarm. The bouncing zombies were still affixed to their frames, though they seemed to leer and push my way.

"Wha-" I started. There was only the merest of warnings, the slightest pressure in my head and then IT was free.

Buzzing, manic energy filled the graveyard room, washing over me, spreading down into the floor, out and up into the walls and ceiling. The funhouse screams and moans grew louder and louder, the floor under me kicked and bucked. IT, that thing that had so long lain in uneasy slumber deep in my mind, the thing that was suddenly growing more and more independent was now free; outside me, a thing apart. In every finger and toe, in my eyes and guts and legs and arms, all through my body there was a strange new sensation.

Emptiness.

I felt like a shriveled balloon, an overturned vessel. I was hollow, limp and drained. For the first time in my life, I was normal, common and truly alone. I was, I realized through the fog of my anguish, uninhabited; a thing I could not bear.

"Come back!" I screamed. "Come back! Please, come back!" Carnival patrons passed through the room, unaware that the cries they were hearing were real. "Anything!" I whispered to the shuddering air. "I'll do anything if only you come back to me."

I felt a force gather above me, a cloud forming over a pitching lake. It rose up and made a motion that could only be interpreted as a questioning smile. The query formed in my head.

"ANYTHING?"

"Yes, yes. Anything! Just please, please come back."

A prickly heat flowed up between my legs and when the lights and sounds died away and the funhouse and the graveyard reformed around me, it was back inside.

But something was different.

Before I could pinpoint what, I was jerked, mask still in

place, to my feet. I tried to move but my body wouldn't respond. As confusion descended an old woman and a little boy came into the room. Without willing it I began to swoop toward them; a funhouse witch wobbling along on a rickety track. As I moved closer the lights and the pogoing corpses speeded up. The stuffed spiders began whirling in their webs. My masked face leaned back and an earsplitting shriek filled the room.

The little boy cried out and began grabbing at the woman's thick leg. She pried his grubby little fingers from her flesh and gently admonished: "Hush, Jory. That's just a fake witch."

I glided in until my wooden witch lips were almost touching Jory's ear. "Umm," I heard myself whisper. "I like tasty, tender little Jory bits." The little boy's eyes went as wide as the baby moons on Daddy's Buick and his face plumped with a building scream. Sensing his outburst, the woman whisked him out of the room just as he began to wail. I cackled low and, heart pounding hard, glided back to my stone.

A strange sensation overtook me, a feeling of pleasure, of having pleased another. A reward for compliance, however forced. As I stood, a not-so-unwilling captive, at the back of the graveyard, a distant memory surfaced. I was sitting on the pasture fence with Daddy one spring morning watching a young foaling kick and caper through the high grass. My outlaw talent was like that foaling, I thought. Here in this funhouse meadow, it could finally run free. We were, I realized, bound together forever. I had accepted it into my heart and I felt changed. I felt reborn. As others filed through the rooms, I stood silent and unmoving, a true false witch. I knew who we were waiting for and grinned wickedly beneath my mask.

Finally they came. I began to moan and sway; I tracked toward them. Angelique giggled her stupid, all-purpose giggle while Bobby smiled and tried to look manly.

"Cool," he said. "Something new. It's about time they updated this dive."

"I think it looks stupid," sneered Angelique.

As I glided closer, a zombie slithered down off its frame. Under the mask, my face was beginning to itch. I was less than a foot away when I cut loose with a scream that scared even me.

"Shit!" Bobby shouted, jumping backwards. Angelique, to her credit, crossed her arms and stood her ground. My hands rose before her and formed into claws. A voice that I didn't recognize came out from the witch's mask.

"POOR, PITIFUL LITTLE ANGELIQUE."

Eyes widening, Angelique backed into Bobby's arms. Sweat was pouring down the inside of my mask now, my face felt as if it were on fire. My upraised arms began to spin in circles. One of my fingernails sliced into Angelique's cheek and she cried out in real pain.

"Hey! This isn't funny."

I was beginning to feel sick. More words came pouring out from the mask. "YOU PROMISED, BOBBY! YOU

PROMISED!" At that Bobby's shorts began to flap and writhe on their own. He pushed away from Angelique and turned to run, but his shorts had dropped down around his knees and he tripped and fell instead. He began crawling in circles, crying like a little kid.

The mask was speaking on its own now.

"YOU LYING LITTLE SHIT, BOBBY BESAW. YOU PROMISED AND YOU LIED. LIED. LIED. LIED."

My arms were blurring pinwheels.

"YOU DARE BRING THIS LITTLE PIECE OF SHIT-SWEET CANDY IN HERE. BAD, BAD BOBBY."

The walls began to shake like before and waves rippled through the floor. Bobby was still crawling in circles but now he was screaming. Angelique was standing against the far wall, blood dripping from her cut cheek, staring at me in undisguised horror. From the corner of my eye I saw the other zombies free themselves and move our way.

I know I promised. I know I did. But not this! Please, please not this! I felt the thing in me stop for a second and I grasped the rough, carved edges of the mask and pulled, thinking I won't, I won't.

The mask wouldn't budge.

I pulled harder but it was like trying to peel the skin off my own face. I tried to scream but the mask chuckled instead, a low, mocking rasp.

Then I knew.

I had been tricked again.

The thing inside me was NOT part of me!

What I had thought was the sound of my poor little talent cavorting in its new found freedom was actually its death rattle. Something much meaner and uglier had devoured it the instant it emerged. ANOTHER had entered me. Maybe it was the mask, or the graveyard, or the whole House of Horrors, I didn't know. I knew only that I had been tricked again, lied to and used.

I turned to run, knowing I couldn't. The chuckle turned to a laugh, the laugh to a roar. The House of Horrors began to shake. Suddenly I was moving backwards. I waved my arms and tried to call out for help but Bobby was buried under a pile of thrusting, wiggling zombies and Angelique was clawing for the exit.

I hit the wall hard, but instead of falling to the floor I began to merge INTO the rough plywood. My limbs stretched, getting thinner and thinner, moving into and through the wood like blood veins working their way through a newly fleshed body. Tendons snapped, bone crushed to powder, my torso expanded, filling the back corridor, oozing around and through and finally into the gears and cogs. Slowly, painfully, inexorably my body spread out through the funhouse, becoming part of it: me and the House of Horrors, dissolving into each other.

Finally only my face--still attached to the mask--was left sticking out-of the wall. Through the rising storm of pain and mutation I could see the zombies shuddering back to their frames. Something that looked like Bobby's face tilted up from the ruins of a body and stared across the graveyard at

PROMISE ME ANYTHING

my vanishing form. The witch mask mouth opened impossibly wide, and a deep, triumphant roar rose up from some abode of darkness unknown and shook the funhouse one last time.

As the thing that had been Bobby Besaw stopped moving, the mask separated from my face and dropped to the floor. The last thing I remember was my eyes flattening like two blue fried eggs against the rough plywood walls just before popping out of existence.

THE LIGHTS ARE on now. Men and women are treading my corridors, searching my nooks and crannies for a missing little girl. Somewhere outside in the moonlit glow a frightened couple stand under a big oak talking to a shaking girl-child. Men in white coats are loading a crimson-stained lump onto an ambulance. If I could smile I would, turning up the foldout wings that extend my trailer truck forms to double their traveling length. I am newly born and find amusement in all things.

Soon, finding my innards bare, the men will move on, through the rest of the carnival and then to the town and fields beyond, searching for a special little girl who somehow slipped between their fingers into a place between two worlds.

Though the carnival is closing down and moving on to the next town, I await tomorrow with building excitement. The story of what happened will precede us and crowds will gather in long wavy lines at my darkened entrance. When the switch is thrown and the power surges through my wires and my PA begins to moan and the ghosts and ghouls begin to clatter and bump, the paying customers will file in, in ones and twos and threes, filling me to capacity.

Once inside, they'll see where it happened and stand and point. They'll make noises of concern and pity, they'll giggle and gawk but deep down inside they'll thrill to the sight. Their true selves will peek out from behind dislodged masks and, feeling safe in the dark, they'll drop all pretense. For a little while they'll exist purely as the BEINGS they really are and for a little while they'll share a fine and rare thing called the truth.

For a little while.

Just before I drop my skirts, close my legs and begin to squeeze.

ERRATA

The photo of Jeanne Cavelos on page 61 of *Deathrealm* #20 was originally taken by Andrew Porter and published in *Science Fiction Chronicle*. It was inadvertently reprinted without permission. *Deathrealm* apologizes for this and regrets the error.

*"In short,
Wicked Mystic
scared the sh*t
out of me."*

- Andrea Locke, *Deathrealm*

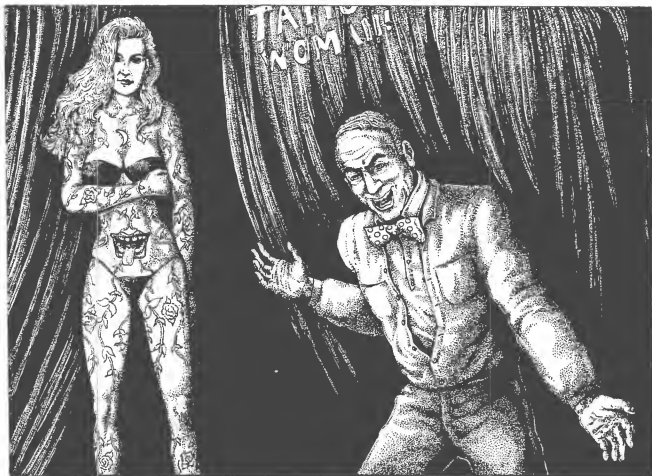


#22 Featured writer + interview, John Grey.
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NOMINATED BEST ZINE, 1993 BY SPWAO



TatTos

By P.D. Cacek

Yeah...I saw you staring at 'em.

No, ma'am, don't mind if you touch 'em. Go right ahead. Just skin under there. What's that? Oh. Yeah, they're pretty enough. Uh-huh, hell of a lot of 'em...yes ma'am that IS true. What? Hell no--didn't get 'em in prison and I ain't one of them God damned bikers you see tearing up the roads. Truth is, I haven't been more'n twenty miles from this town in fifty-five years.

The reason? Guess you could say I'm minding 'em for someone. No. No...wouldn't mind telling you, but it does make an old man dry in the telling of it. Yes ma'am, another drink would make it easier, thank you.

Well then...more'n likely you weren't even born back in the autumn of '54...

HARLAN SQUINTED INTO the sun and tried to spot the Ferris Wheel chair that was carrying his best friend.

And Jenny-May Kelly.

He'd had a crush on Jenny-May since the summer her dresses started pooching out in front, but when she sashayed up to them, all pink gingham and freckles, and mentioned--shy

like--that she wouldn't mind taking a ride on the wheel, Harlan had just stood there like he'd been pole-axed.

Which left Ronny all that more room to jump at the chance. Ronny Deen was always trying to find ways to prove he was more mature than his fifteen years...

...which was probably why Jenny-May had suddenly started screaming "...let me off! I hate you...!" from somewhere near the top of the ride.

The wheel had barely come to a screeching stop when Harlan saw a blur of blond hair and pink skirt hightailing it toward the row of concession stands. Ronny came slinking over a moment later--the imprint of a small hand decorating the side of his face.

"What the hell'd you do, Deen?" Harlan asked, even though a part of him didn't want to know.

Ronny sashayed his lanky body exactly the same way Jenny-May had then gingerly rubbed the red spot on his cheek.

"Aw, she just got upset 'cause I tried put my hand under her dress. Hell, I wasn't anywhere near her panties when she smacked me. Bitch."

Harlan shook his head and scuffed the worn out toe of his sneaker across the hard-pack. Ronny was the only boy Harlan knew (aside from the *Greasers* who hung out at the filling station) who cursed like he knew what he was doing.

And enjoyed it.

Harlan checked his watch and looked at the thinning

crowd. They'd been at the carny since early morning and supper time was coming up...but it was still too early to be thinking about heading home. Home meant chores and standing up straight and an upstairs bedroom that still was papered in *Cowboys-and-Indians*.

"Well, got any other bright ideas?"

Ronny scuffed a couple furrows of his own and picked at one of the juicier pimples on his face.

"I dunno...How much money we got left?"

We?

Harlan dug out the last of the money *he* made mowing lawns and counted it silently.

"Four dollars and ninety...two cents."

Ronny poked a finger through the loose change as if he didn't believe him and frowned.

"That's it?"

"Yeah, *that's it*," Harlan said as he balled the money into his fist. "And I don't remember you offering to pay for anything. *Shi--shoot!*"

"Oh, Harlan...almost said it. And almost saying is almost a sin. I'm gonna tell Reverend Meecher on you!" Ronny laughed just long enough for Harlan to know he was only joking about telling the preacher and shrugged. "Besides, you know I'm flat broke."

Harlan didn't know him any other way.

Still smiling, he grabbed Harlan's hand and transferred the money into his own grimy palm. By the look on his face the amount hadn't increased any in the exchange.

"Damn, this ain't even enough for a good time. Well...we can either try to gyp us a couple o' beers or head over to the side-shows. What'd ya think, Harl?"

Harlan hooked his thumbs into the back pocket of his jeans and glanced at the crowd over by the concession stands. Even if he were able to find Jenny-May and offer her a Snocone to apologize, chances were she'd take one look at Ronny and cut them *both* dead.

"Side shows," he grumble. "I read in the paper they got a real live three headed calf. What the heck you looking at?"

Ronny was staring at him--bug eyed.

"Either the dumbest hick ever born," he said, "or someone who just went crazy while I wasn't looking."

"Why?"

"Why? What do you mean *why*? You want t' spend hard earned money looking at a real live freak of nature when we could be looking at *real* live naked women?"

Harlan felt every drop of spit in his mouth evaporate.

Ronny wanted to go see a Coochie Show.

"Geez...Ronny."

"Geez, *nothin'!* We're almost sixteen, Harlan...*sixteen* and never seen nothing but a couple 'a tits in the *National Geographic*. And those were only on some dumb ignorant savages." Ronny tightened his grip on the money and shook it in Harlan's face. "This might be our only chance t' see a naked woman we don't have to marry first."

That almost made sense.

"But how d'you know they got a...*show* like that here?"

Harlan asked.

Ronny glanced over his shoulder and moved in so close that Harlan could smell the Old Spice cologne he'd swiped out of his father's medicine cabinet.

"All these carny's got shows like that. How d'ya think they keep makin' money? With some three-headed calf? *Shit!*" Harlan felt the point of Ronny's sharp elbow dig into his belly. "And sometimes they even *dance*, Harl. My uncle told me. They stand right up on stage and shake what they got...really get things *movin'*! Just think about it."

And Harlan did. He thought about what Jenny-May would look like without her gingham dress...up on stage...*really getting things moving*--and felt the familiar, and lately frequent, twitching between his legs.

"Yep," Ronny said quietly, "I see you're thinkin', all right."

Harlan looked over at his best friend in the whole world and the felt the words pop out of his mouth like a belch that happens after drinking root-beer too fast.

"Fuck you."

But instead of looking shocked, Ronny's face beamed as if the Heavenly Gates had just opened up and St. Peter laid down a *Welcome* mat personally.

"Goin' to see naked women and cussin' all in the same day," Ronny said as he threw an arm over Harlan's shoulders. "I think there's hope for you yet."

EXCEPT THERE WASN'T any Coochie show.

No naked women.

No shaking of any kind.

Just a two-bit *Tent of Curiosities* that promised "...sights that will leave a strong man weak..."

And by that time Ronny had gotten over the miracle of Harlan's cussing to start a streak of his own.

"God *damned* sons-of-bitches! Ain't this just like some shit-house, back-water freak show? *Damn!* Lookit here, this supposed to make a strong man weak? A lousy stuffed snake eatin' his own tail? HAH! Oh, yeah, *this'll* do 'er...a dead baby in a bottle. Whoa. Ain't that something?" *Yawn.* "Shit. Oh! And lookee here--it's the famous three headed calf you wanted to see. Careful, Harl...this might just scare you to death. Fuck!"

Harlan walked over to the small pen and looked down at the creature standing hock deep in manure. It wasn't scary--just a little sickening. Only one head was strong enough to look back, the other two were little more than twisted lumps of pink flesh. But when Harlan reached out to pat it, it was one of the deformed heads that twisted around and licked his fingers with a maggot-white tongue.

Harlan yanked his hand back as if it'd been scalded.

"Jesus!"

Ronny just hunched his shoulders.

"Well, at least we know it ain't no fake."

"Nothing in here's fake, boy."

Harlan spun around so quickly his butt slammed into the calf's stall. A thin bawl--in three part harmony--echoed

through the tent.

The old man was leaning against the side of the snake exhibit, toothlessly chomping on the soggy end of a cigar. A wiry grey beard covered his face from the eyes down...from the eyes up he was as smooth and wrinkled as one of the calf's extra heads.

And he was so hunched over and palsied that Harlan though he might be one of the exhibits--*World's only TWO HUNDRED YEAR OLD MAN*--come down to be sociable.

"Everything in this tent's as God made it, boy. Ain't nothing been faked for the yokels."

"Yep, well, you know how us hicks are?" Ronny started. "We just about piss our drawers off when we get too excited. Like iffen we suppose that *thar* thing in the bottle were a real dead baby, we might get all flustered and feel *obliged* to call the Sheriff."

"They got codes against showin' stuff like that, ol' man," Ronny growled. "Or doesn't anybody in this dick-water carny care about things like that?"

The old man lurched toward them and Harlan offered up a small prayer--just like he did every time Ronny opened his mouth and dragged them both head-first into the crapper.

"We care, boy...but if you'd read the plaque you woulda seen that baby's a *scientific* miracle. Yes you would." He hobbled past them and touched the bottle gently with one trembling hand. "Like I said before, boy, everything in this tent's as God made it--and God made this one special."

"He lived in his mama's belly three whole days after she blew the top of her head off. Didn't seem right to bury him after trying so hard to stay alive."

"Uh-huh."

Ronny yawned and was doing his damndest to look bored. "So how'd you folks get hold of it?" he asked.

The old man gave the bottle one more tap and smiled.

"That woulda been my son had he lived just a little bit longer. M'wife run off and by the time I found her she was already three days gone. But when I seen her belly quiverin' I opened her up. Just wasn't fast enough I guess."

"Nice story," Ronny said, "but it didn't make me feel the least bit weak. How about *you*, Harl?"

Harlan was contemplating Ronny's slow death when the old man left his bottled son and ambled up to them.

"See I got me a couple o' real connoisseurs here," he said, "how'd you boys like to see something *special*?"

This time Harlan yawned and walked away.

This wasn't his first carny and it wasn't the first time some traveling geek made him the same offer. Usually the "something special" was behind the tents where the geek would drop his drawers and offer Harlan a shiny new silver dollar to do the same.

He waited for Ronny next to a case of "real" shrunken heads--allowing himself only the occasional glance over his shoulder. Whatever the old man was offering was having an effect--Ronny's face kept getting whiter and whiter...

...almost as white as the dead baby's.

Harlan took a deep breath and stared down into the

case. The head nearest the front looked like it was smiling behind the rawhide stitches in its lips. Smirking. At him.

He was trying to copy the smirk when Ronny came up and grabbed his arm.

"C'mon. The show's about to start!"

"What the heck...hell are you talking about?"

"They got a tattooed lady and the old man says she doesn't wear much so the customers can see...y'know, her tattoos." Ronny's smile looked a little like the one on the shrunken head. "I think maybe *she's* what makes strong men weak, Harl. C'mon!"

Harlan let himself be dragged to the far end of the tent where a dozen folding chairs had been set up in front of a small stage. Except for the painting on the canvas curtain, it reminded Harlan of an ordinary Tent Revival.

Except for the painting.

Harlan felt his knees go wobbly an instant before his rear landed on the cool metal seat.

Where there should have been a painting of the Archangel Michael smiting Lucifer with a flaming sword (amid the smiles and upraised palms of the Celestial Hosts) was a life-sized picture of a lady.

A tattooed lady.

Every inch of her skin was covered with brilliant swirly-cues...and it *looked* like there was a lot more skin than costume as far as Harlan could tell.

Gold painted curls curled modestly across the swelling mounds of her (*breast*) chest and lay across the top of the bold-faced letters:

LILY

THE TATTOOED FLOWER

Harlan looked up into the painted green eyes and felt the crotch of his pants suddenly get two sizes too small.

Again.

He crossed his legs and slumped deeper into the chair.

"God," Ronny whispered as he scrunched over to let a man in a wrinkled white suit into the row, "ain't she *some-thing*?"

"I bet she doesn't even look like that," Harlan whispered back. *NOBODY* could look like that. "That's just a cartoon like Little Lulu."

"No, she looks *just* like that, the old man told me. And that ain't all, Harl, he said...SHHH, it's starting!"

The curtain opened--tearing the painted woman in half.

Harlan just managed to catch a brief glimpse of golden hair and long, pale legs when the fat old bitty sitting directly in front of him got up like a startled chicken and huffed out...dragging a chubby little boy and pained looking man along with her. "Hussy! Painted Harlot! Jezebel!!!"

Harlan barely noticed--probably wouldn't have noticed if the tent suddenly collapsed around his ears.

She was sitting in an old-fashioned shoe-shine chair--bare feet settled easily into the wide stirrups...legs spread so the audience could see that the tattoos went all the way up to her...

Harlan squirmed against the metal chair as another

woman got up and left.

"Ladies..." The old man watched the woman huff out and tipped an imaginary hat to her. "Gentlemy, I give you Lily...the Tattooed Flower!"

He held out a trembling hand and she took it. Smiling to the audience, she modestly closed her legs and stepped down from the chair. The old man escorted her to the edge of the stage and left her there.

She still stood there for a moment--sea-green eyes moving slowly over the crowd (Harlan's spine did a *fingers-on-the-blackboard* twitch when their eyes met)--then tossed her hair back over her shoulders.

She was wearing a black two-piece bathing suit, but what was on her skin was almost more interesting.

Almost.

Except for the silvery Harvest Moon resting above the deep cleavage of her breasts and a smiling, red-lipped mouth covering her belly-button, the rest of the tattoos reminded Harlan of ivy creeping up the sides of white marble columns. Thin lines of color looped and curled, crossed and doubled back over every inch of her (*that he could see*) but her face and hands.

She slowly lifted her arms over her head as tinny music filled the tent. Harlan followed the sound to the old-fashioned gramophone the old man was cranking up. When he looked back at the stage the woman was "dancing"...although Harlan had never seen dancing like that before in his life.

Legs apart, knees bent, her hips swayed in time to the beat while her arms twisted and curled around her head like snakes.

Like the tattoos.

Near the end of the dance she spun around and tipped backwards, giving everyone a quick peek under her suit top.

"Damn," Ronny moaned and Harlan jumped because he'd all but forgotten his friend was there. "Damn, damn, damn!"

The music stopped and she curtsied as if she'd just finished reciting a poem at a church social; then blew a kiss and walked back to the chair. She looked tired. More than tired, Harlan noticed as she slipped her feet back into the stirrups--she looked *bored*.

He saw her start to yawn as the curtain whooshed closed.

The applause sounded like a summer thunderstorm.

Men hooted and howled and stamped their feet. And Ronny tried his best to be the loudest.

Harlan slumped down in his chair and tried to remember what a normal heart beat felt like.

"God, Harl," Ronny gasped as he collapsed down next to him, "did you *ever*? Man! How much money we got left?"

Harlan swallowed and ran his tongue over his lips. *Most*

of him felt drier than an old bone.

"I dunno, 'bout four dollars and change, I guess. Why?"

"Gimme."

"What?"

Ronny's long fingered hand was already snaking toward Harlan's pocket when he slapped it away.

"I'll get it." He barely got it out of his pocket when it was snatched away. "That's all there is so whatever you're planning had better be worth it."

"It will be, Harl. You just wait and see."

Harlan watched Ronny elbow two salesmen out of the way as he flapped the money in the old man's face. *Oh, sweet Jesus...now what?*

Five minutes later Ronny came back holding two bright red tickets.

Harlan's crotch throbbed just looking at them.

"Wh-What're they for?"

"Special show," Ronny said as he slipped the tickets into the back pocket of his jeans. "Back here. Ten o'clock."

"No kind of show starts that late. That old man took you like a regular."

"If that's so then I wasn't the only one." Ronny jerked

his head toward the stage and Harlan saw men carefully tucking their own blood red tickets into billfolds and pockets. "The old man wouldn't tell me much...except that in *this* show all she's gonna be wearing are those tattoos. Still think I got took?"

When Harlan didn't answer, Ronny clapped his hands like a kid at a puppet show and bolted for the exit.

"Ron!"

"Ten o'clock, Harl...you *be* here! It's gonna really be something!"

Yeah, Harlan thought, *really* something.

Closing his eyes, he wondered how much time he had left before the next "ordinary" show...

...and if it'd be enough for him to sneak out without anyone seeing the growing stain at the front of his pants.

THERE WERE AT least thirty men waiting in front of the tent.

All laughing and holding tickets.

Harlan leaned against the closed booth and tried to rub the chill out of his arms. Winter felt a lot closer that night, as if it'd been sneaking up on them all afternoon like a cat going after a bird--and finally pounced.

"It's past ten, isn't it, Harl? I mean we got here at five till and we've been waiting for a while. Where the hell is that old man?"

"Probably over at the tavern buying drinks with *our* money." Harlan opened his fist and stared at the wrinkled ticket. The moonlight made it look as grey as a dead leaf.

...Harlan jerked back as he pushed against her...and watched his hands sink into her flesh. A moldering corpse writhed on the chair where Lily had just laid, the bone-tipped fingers tightening their grip on his shoulders. Eyes as white and rotten as month old chicken eggs bore into his...

And about as practical.

"There's not gonra be any special show, Ronny...and those tattoos were probably just painted on. I bet you dollars to donuts that they pull this scam in every darn town from here to--"

"Then you'd lose, boy."

The back of Harlan's head caught the corner of the booth as he turned. The old man held the tent flap open with one hand and nodded. His skin was the same color as the ticket.

"Ain't no scam...and like I said before, everything in here's as God made it." Sweeping the flap wider, he bowed from the waist. "Right this way, gentlemen. Lily's expecting you."

Ronny rabbit-punched Harlan in the belly and grabbed his arm.

"C'mon, Harl...this is it. This is it!"

Except for it being darker, the inside of the tent hadn't changed: The calf moored softly--harmonically--from its pen, the shrunken heads smiled...and the old man's dead baby still floated silently in its bottle.

Nothing had changed.

But everything felt different.

Harlan followed Ronny into the second row of seats and sat down just as someone clapped. It sounded like a cherry bomb going off in a tin can and Harlan jumped...felt all of them jump.

"Hurry, gentlemen." The old man was standing on the stage, hands clasped together. Smiling. "As soon as you're all seated the show can begin."

There was more than promise in the man's voice, but Harlan couldn't even begin to guess at what it was. The others must have known though, because they settled down and got as quiet as sinners at a Rededication.

The smile on the old man's face grew, bristling out the raggedly beard like the ruff on a mad dog's neck.

"The management wishes to offer you gentlemen the warmest of welcomes," he said "The very warmest."

A Greaser who didn't look much older than Harlan whooped and clapped his hands. A couple of men in the first row whistled through their teeth and jostled each other. A red-necked farm hand in faded coveralls stomped the ground with a field scuffed shoe. Ronny cupped his hands to his mouth and howled.

Harlan dug his elbows into his belly.

"Then without further delay..." The old man reached behind him and grabbed the curtain just below the painted Lily's chin.

"Gentlemen...I give you, Lily...the painted flower!"

He dragged the curtain back.

And the tent got silent.

Lily was in the shoe-shine chair...toes curled over the stirrups, legs spread wide, golden hair flung back over her shoulders...

...and as naked as God made her.

Just to make sure there was no doubt in any one's

mind, Lily arched her back and scooted forward in the chair--parting the hairless, tattooed slit between her legs until Harlan could see the pink layers of skin unfold like the petals of a flower.

...a tattooed flower...

Harlan held his breath and pressed both fists--knuckles first--into his groin.

"Your ticket's good for one free ride, gentlemen," the old man said from somewhere in the shadows. "Who'll be first?"

Someone...Harlan wasn't even sure it hadn't been him...asked "What kind of ride?"

"Why the ride of a lifetime, gentlemen. Tonight each of you has a chance to find out what pleasures abide between the tattooed petals of this beautiful flower."

Lily leaned forward and slide one hand slowly toward the beautiful flower the old man was talking about.

Music filled the tent again--but this time the strong, driving beat reminded Harlan of an African travelogue he saw in Geography class.

"Lily doesn't have all night, gentlemen," the old man whispered. "Which one of you country bulls will service her first?"

Feet shuffled uneasily against the sawdusted ground and chairs squeaked. One squeaked louder than the others as the farmer in the faded overalls stood up.

"My daddy always said it was best t' start a job instead of comin' on near the end. Guess I'll go first."

Rubbing a hand across the back of his neck, the farmer walked loose-limbed to the stage and lifted himself onto it. Someone hooted from the audience and he turned--waved his ticket and smile.

Harlan saw him lose the smile the moment he turned around. Toward Lily.

She held out her hand, accepted the red ticket then said something to the man. Her voice was so soft that Harlan couldn't hear what she said...or what the man answered...but it made her smile as she scooted forward and pressed the moist petals of her sex firmly against the visible bulge at the front of the man's overalls.

The farmer's moan echoed through the tent as he undid the shoulder catches and let them fall. He mounted her without saying another word--without even looking at her.. head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut...

...and pounded against her for less than a minute before whimpering like a kicked dog.

Harlan was surprised that it took that long.

The next man was on the stage even before the farmer had hiked his 'alls back into place. Lily didn't watch him leave.

She was too busy smiling up at the new man.

Harlan kept a running count in his head as each man slipped between her legs.

The Greaser kid rammed into her seventeen times.

A big-shouldered man busted out crying on the count of thirty.

A tall, skinny man with glasses shouted "Hallelujah" after nine.

Ronny walked to the stage as the preacher's son was stuffing himself back into his pants.

Under the spot lights, Ronny's skin looked as white as the old man's dead baby. When she held out her hand for the ticket, Ronny's arm got half-way up and stopped.

Harlan was on his feet, moving toward his friend--close enough to the stage to hear the chair creak as she leaned forward and asked Ronny his name. It almost struck Harlan as funny, her being so sociable when she was bare assed and spread wider than a barn door.

When she asked again and got no reply the smile finally faded from her lips.

"Hell, boy," the old man said suddenly, "if you're not gonna talk then at least do *something* worthwhile. You paid for the ride, might as well take it!"

Harlan felt his own balls pucker as Lily reached out and unzipped Ronny's fly. She whispered softly as her finger slipped inside his pants...then yelped as he squirted his load half way up her arm.

Ronny's face was the same color of the ticket in his hand as he ran from the tent.

The Greaser kid was the first to laugh, but others soon joined him. The old man just shook his head.

"Okay, boy," he said, "let's hope you do a better job than your friend."

It took Harlan a few seconds to realize the old man was speaking to him...even longer to realize that he was already up on the stage.

With Lily.

She was younger than he'd first imagined, not much older than himself, and so pale that her skin beneath the rainbow-colored tattoos looked like milk glass.

When he handed her his ticket, she smiled up at him and cocked her head to one side.

"You're not going to be as quiet as your friend, are you?" she asked.

Harlan watched her red-tipped nails curl around the ticket--afraid to look anywhere else.

"No, ma'am."

"Good. What's your name?"

Name?

"Ah...my name's Harlan."

She scooted closer to the front of his pants. He couldn't help but watch.

"Just Harlan?"

"N-no, ma'am. Um, it's H-Harlan Fitzhugh Marnell. Ma'am."

Lily shuddered. Threw back her head and groaned louder than any of the men who had emptied themselves into her.

"Simeon!"

Harlan turned as the old man walked to the center of the stage and grabbed the edge of the curtain.

"All right, gentlemen," he shouted, "show's over."

"The hell it is," someone shouted back. "I still got my ride comin'!"

Harlan felt Lily's nails raked the front of his pants as the curtain rattled close behind them.

Shutting out the angry sounds.

Shutting him in.

With her.

"Harlan. Fitzhugh. Marnell." She tugged his underpants down to his thighs and licked one set of lips as she guided him toward another pair. "I love your name, Harlan Fitzhugh Marnell."

"May I have it?"

Harlan gasped as the buttery warmth of her body molded around his penis.

"May I have your name?"

He would have given her *anything* at that moment. "Y-y-YES!"

She laughed and wrapped her legs around his waist, drew him in tighter and murmured his name over and over again...

...faster and faster...

until Harlan felt himself explode.

He collapsed in her arms and tried to catch his breath as Lily suddenly arched her back and screamed in ecstasy.

Again.

When Harlan looked up breathing became even more difficult.

The old man was standing next to the chair, slowly jabbing a needle and thread through the taut skin of Lily's right breast. He looked up and smiled when he noticed Harlan watching.

"Royal blue," he said as the needle pierced the skin and Lily shuddered. "Special color. Real strong."

The thread left behind a dark blue stain in her skin...the color tinting the blood that seeped from the tiny holes.

"She likes you, boy. She only uses the royal blue when she likes a man."

Harlan followed the old man's nod. There were millions of tattoos criss-crossing her body...and all of them were men's names.

Millions of names...*thousands* of them in dark blue.

Stanley Warren Micklewhite

Salvatore Russell Orrico

Edwin Michael Floyd-Simmons

Jarrod True Warknock

Galvin Kane Hookham

"That there's *my* paw," the old man said tapping the needle against one of the *blue* names, "Galvin Kane Hookham. Was some kind of travelin' salesman I think Lily said."

Lily.

Harlan watched his name being stitched onto her breast just above the nipple...being *added* to the end of the buttercup yellow *Lionel Joseph Broz* as Lily sank her nails into his shoulders and shrieked.

P.D. CACEK

"She don't take much," the old man said as he got back to work, "and what she does a man don't hardly notice. It's just that sometimes, when a name's special...like yours--and m' paw's--well then she takes a little more."

Lily bucked against Harlan as the old man started embrodering *Marnell* into her trembling flesh.

"I understand 'cause I was born into it, but m' wife..." the old man shook his head as a drop of blood slid down the curve of Lily's breast. "You got a good name, boy, it's gonna keep her goin' 'till the next time."

"NO!"

Harlan jerked back as he pushed against her...and watched his hands sink into her flesh. A moldering corpse writhed on the chair where Lily had just laid, the bone-tipped fingers tightening their grip on his shoulders. Eyes as white and rotten as month old chicken eggs bore into his.

"You said I could have your name, Harlan Fitzhugh Marnell." The voice was as cold and empty as winter wind. "You said I could have it."

Harlan's body convulsed as a maggot-white tongue slithered from the tattooed smile on her belly and licked him. Greedily.

YEAH...SEEN THAT look before, too. You're thinkin' I'm just some ol'nummy who gets his jollies connin' drinks out of pretty ladies, don't you. Well, I'll tell you what I think... I think Lily takes part of a man's soul along with those "Special Names" she got tattooed all over her.

What? No, guess that doesn't explain about these tattoos of mine, does it?

I dunno...the older I got the more I worried about that piece of soul she took. Probably just being foolish, man can't get into Heaven with a lot less...but I thought if she was ever to come back this way I might just be able to offer her a trade, you know? All these names for mine. No, ma'am...haven't seen her or that camy in forty years; but I ain't goin' nowhere.

What you'd say your name was? See, I got this little empty spot right over here on my wrist...

THE PINK TWIST INN (Continued from page 33)

What the Triumvirate pulled off was ingenious. Inside the Rock 'n Roll McDonalds there is a display. A '57 Thunderbird with two mannequins in the front seat. Speck was a coward to the end; he didn't have his muskrat knife or .38, not that it would have done him a lick of good.

He actually cowered in the front seat of that T-bird when they set him on fire. He burned for a long time and I could see his pock marks widening and was myself mesmerized by the flames inside of his throat, like tiny sparklers on a summer night.

So caught up in it, revolted by Speck's crying like a baby, the tears streaming off of him, so completely into it was I that I never saw the Triumvirate leave.

THE FLAMES THE executioners caused were real; the

sprinkler system kicked in soon enough. The Arson Squad is still investigating. I'm the only one who could see him, but Speck is still there between Ken and Barbie in the T-bird. Fish-mouthed in the ultimate death as he always was in life.

I see on the news that Frank Haid, the Painkiller, hung himself in his cell at Stateville. Guy killed handicapped men in the name of the Lord. Now he done jerked himself to Jesus.

I can only speculate on what holy flames he might be consumed with.

CARCOSA (Continued from page 43)

CORSET DIGEST is doing a special D.F. Lewis issue. He may not be kidding.

To get THE VELVET VAMPIRE, all you have to do is join The Vampire Society, which you may do by sending twelve pounds fifty (UK) or sixteen pounds (US) for annual membership to Membership Secretary, PO Box 68, Keighley, West Yorkshire, BD22 6RU. Make checks or international money orders out to The Vampire Society; no foreign currency transactions please. Here's where it gets interesting. You need to sign the application form or, if under 18, have your guardian sign. Then: "Please describe your personal feelings and beliefs about vampires on a separate sheet of paper." They have some 300 members on both sides of the Atlantic and have regular meetings, including "the occasional dinner, costume ball and vampire weekend by the sea." As to its aims: "The Society exists to bring together people who share a common interest in art, literature, film and theatre dedicated to the vampire and its associated gothic genre."

It's a slick magazine with lots of photos and art, fiction, articles, reviews, and personal feelings about vampires from new members. The cover of the latest, issue XXI, is a photo of some wicked malt standing in a distressed cemetery, decked out in a black corset and underwear, spiking a cello through some dude's heart. Crucial. Maybe Des wasn't kidding me. The crew seem to be into dressing up like characters from DRACULA, and there are adverts for flowing gowns, corsets, suits, shoes, etc. to help you look the part. Vampire fans and costumers really need to apply for membership. Do it before sunrise.

A must-have horror collection from England is TOUCH WOOD: NARROW HOUSES VOL. TWO, edited by Peter Crowther and published by Little, Brown & Co. 165 Great Dover St., London, SE1 4YA for a mere 16 pounds. If you hurry, you might find a copy from Robert Weinberg, 15145 Oxford Dr., Oak Forest, IL 60452 for forty bucks. This is the second in Crowther's series of original horror anthologies centering on the theme of superstitions. Some truly awesome writing here. To my regret, I never even saw the first one (I said to hurry), and this, the second volume, arrived too late to be read for YBB--a real bitch with December publications and a January deadline. Maybe you can catch volume three. In any event, yer man Wagner has a story in the collection. So does Des. But you knew that.

THE GRAVEN IMAGE

(Continued from page 29)

and is gets ready to rape her when Dollman comes to the rescue (only after wasting all the other toys with his big damn gun). Dollchick gets loose and Dollman blows Baby Oopsy away and everything turns out fine. The last scene consists of the slight Dollcouple in the back of a cab and Dollman tells the driver to "Hurry up. We're a little short on patience."

The meager plotline skimmed on many levels. The pace of the story was modest at best as much of the action was measly and trivial. The character development relied much too heavily on the past prequels leaving the audience with the impression that Dollman is paltry and a minor element in the film while Dollchick is scrawny and puny in depth; just another superficial character.

As some of you may know, Full Moon splices on the end of all of their movies a little show called Video Zone. It is essentially a documentary of the movie you just watched, interviews with the actors, and how to buy a Full Moon T-shirt. This episode of Video Zone was more fun to watch than the sparse feature itself. Charles Band formally announces and shows off the new Full Moon studios as they finally got all of the shops and three sound stages under one roof. Also, Quiet Riot did some insignificant music for D-MAN VS. D-TOYS and are featured in the Video Zone short.

This scanty film from a small independent studio, with a tiny plot about miniature people deserves a shallow grave.

MORE FORBIDDEN FLICKS

By Randy Johnston

I HAVE BEEN a fan of the horror film since an early, wide-eyed viewing of **INVASION OF THE SAUCER-MEN**. Instantly hooked, I would scan the weekly TV News for anything resembling a monster movie. **FAMOUS MONSTERS OF FILMLAND** and **CASTLE OF FRANKENSTEIN** fed the flames. Eventually I was suspended from high school for cutting classes to see the premiere of **THE EXORCIST**. I was a hopeless addict.

While my movie interests have ranged far and wide over the years, I remain loyal to the horror film. I have been known to forgive far more ineptitude amongst the purveyors of horror than other genres. In this column I plan to cover recent video releases. I would appreciate any comments or recommendations you may have.

WARLOCK: THE ARMAGEDDON (1993, Vidmark)

There is little to connect this feature to its predecessor, **WARLOCK** (1991), other than the fact that Julian Sands has the title role in both films. No knowledge of the earlier movie is required to appreciate the sequel.

Every six hundred years, during an eclipse of the moon, the son of Satan (i.e., the warlock) is born. For six days God's head is turned and the warlock attempts to gather six sacred runestones. If he does, all hell breaks loose and Satan rules. With a map created from his mother's flesh, the warlock sets out on his mission.

After several gruesome encounters, the warlock has all but two of the crystals. Those belong to a group of druids living in California. The druids have retained their old science and are aware of the warlock's goal. They must prepare their children for the upcoming battle. But first, they must kill them.

WARLOCK: THE ARMAGEDDON is more entertaining than the original entry in the series. The special effects are much improved and more widely employed. Director Anthony Hickox (**HELLRAISER III**, **WAXWORK** and more) brings out the good in a mediocre plot and holds Julian Sands back a notch in what could have been a scene-chewing role. My nod for the one-to-watch goes to Paula Marshall (who also played the dark-haired, punk girl in **Hellraiser III**).

JASON GOES TO HELL: THE FINAL FRIDAY (1993, New Line)

Since the title tells all, why shouldn't I confirm it? In the end, Jason goes to Hell. Surprise! It is hard to keep old Jason down, though, and if you think a trip straight to Hell is going to be the

end of it all, think again. A certain knife-gloved hand grabs the hockey mask and pulls it down into the ground. You don't suppose...nah, no way...but wait, New Line does have the rights to both characters. Hm...mmmm...

The film opens as a SWAT team blows up Jason. His remains are retrieved and taken to a Federal morgue. The evil heart begins to beat and quickly possesses a mortician. The spirit of Jason lives. Each time one of the possessed persons walks past a mirror we see the image of Jason. Jumping from body to body, Jason leaves a bloody trail. His goal is to get to his sister and her daughter. One of the two must give birth so Jason Voorhees can live again in his own superhero form.

I tend to view the Jason films with little interest. Perhaps it is because they are so consistently dumb. We all know Jason will arise after the volley of shotgun blasts to his chest. All surprise is long gone and the filmmakers seem to just be milking the formula. However, they do well with the market they are aiming at. This most recent addition to the series is far better than the first few.

Note: The video box sports the title **FRIDAY THE 13TH, PART IX** though the film's title remains as listed above. This was done for display reasons.

OTHER NEWS:

I RECENTLY WATCHED a few minutes of rushes from **TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE, PART 4**. It was a brief scene where a teenage couple seek help at a farmhouse. Writer/director Kim Henkel filmed around the Austin area using local talent. Many of the original stars were offered cameo parts but declined. It is not fair to judge based on unedited footage, but this could be the worst of the **TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE** films. No distributor or release date has been announced.

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INSIDE HORROR PUBLISHING

By Jeanne Cavelos

I REALIZED RECENTLY how many horror novels I'm publishing that have to do with psychological, unquantifiable issues of the mind. And I realized that this type of book didn't always use to be so prominent in horror. In the old days, it was often science that was the catalyst. In *FRANKENSTEIN*, for example, it is science, and Dr. Frankenstein's hubris to push science to new extremes, that creates the monster. Science is a source of evil. We've all read books or seen movies where science (or the misuse of science) causes some horrible mutation to take place. Giant ants invade towns; a man trades heads with a fly. Or a new drug reanimates dead body parts, or changes a man from good to evil. Sometimes science even provides the answer in these situations. It can be used for good or evil, like the Force, like witchcraft, or any power. But for many years science was the belief, the religion, most used and most universal. It dominated our lives. And while it certainly wasn't the only type of horror out there, for many years it dominated the field.

But there was also another track of horror—the horror of the mind, of inner forces taking on power. Stephen King's *CARRIE*, who could have been called a witch in another time, has a will, a power in her mind. And while her power is given a scientific name psychokinesis, the scientists are unable to explain or control it. It is beyond science. As we've come to realize the limitations of science to learn that it cannot solve all our problems and will probably not destroy us all in one clean blast, we've lost faith. And we've gone back to an older, more mystical faith, a belief in the unquantifiable, in the mind, in the hu-

man soul. So in *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD*, it doesn't matter whether we believe the zombies were caused by a passing comet or by Hell overflowing with souls. Science has no solution. What's important is how humans deal with the zombie threat. In *NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET*, the evil is in our very dreams, in our irrational, sleeping minds. In Clive Barker's *HELLRAISER*, the evil is called forth by one man's passionate search for pain and sensation. And in Kathe Koja's *SKIN*, this theme is carried to its ultimate extreme by a woman's desire to transform her body into a work of art through whatever painful methods are available.

I don't mean to lump all horror into these two camps, for there are other camps (religious horror being another biggie), and the lines between them are not always clear. But it is interesting to notice the increased focus on the mind in recent horror.

Kathe Koja is one major author exploring these themes. Instead of science, her characters are usually obsessed with art. In *SKIN*, the main character is a dancer obsessed with pushing the envelope, doing something no one's done before (sound like Dr. Frankenstein?), and so moves from sculpting her body with exercise to tattooing to body piercing to scarring to...well, you have to read the book for that. She is creating a monster as surely as Frankenstein, but her power to create comes from within, from the power of her obsession. In Kathe's new book, *STRANGE ANGELS*, which will be out in hardcover in a March, a man is obsessed with the crayon drawings done by a schizophrenic painter, Robin. The man believes Robin's drawings hint at a transcendent

truth he's been searching for all his life. And in his attempt to find that truth, he convinces Robin, who is mentally unstable, to go off his medication, to undergo sleep and sensory deprivation, and other mind-altering techniques. As Robin deteriorates, the main character becomes convinced that Robin is transforming into something new, some kind of angel. It's a fascinating book.

Another author exploring these themes is Robert Devereaux. In his first novel, *DEADWEIGHT*, the main character is a woman who discovers she has a power something like a super green thumb. She can make plants grow by touching them and sending energy through her hands, similar to the power her mother had. This woman, Carin, had an abusive husband whom she finally killed in self-defense, but feels guilty about his death. She visits his grave and, using her power, revives the flowers she's left there. But like a force of the subconscious, her power revives him bit by bit, her psychological attachment to him calling him back to life. Needless to say, very bad things ensue. In a clash between violence and healing, Carin finds that her power can not only restore flowers to life, it can restore people, and can heal them, repeatedly, of any injury her sadistic husband wishes to inflict, as many times as he wishes to inflict it. Both powers, her healing and his sadism, arise from the mind, from personality, and whoever's personality is stronger will win.

These are just two of many authors exploring the fascinating themes related to the power of the mind.

Jeanne Cavelos is a senior editor at Dell Publishing and is founder and editor of the Abyss and Cutting Edge imprints.

WHO'S WHO IN DEATHREALM

Jim Austin lives at Landmark College, in Putney, VT. Blood Brothers is his first appearance in DEATHREALM—hopefully not his last.

Storm Bear is the pseudonym for a screenwriter in Winston-Salem, NC, who wishes to remain anonymous. He drew the name **Storm Bear** from his Native American ancestry since the Screenwriters Guild, to which he belongs, is all full up with other writers bearing his given name.

P. D. Cacek, a native Californian, holds a BA degree in Creative Writing from the University of Long Beach, and has been writing ever since. Her work has appeared in PULPHOUSE, MIDNIGHT SHADOWS, NEWER YORK, JOURNEYS TO THE TWILIGHT ZONE II, BIZARRE BAZAAR '93 & '94, BIZARRE SEX & OTHER CRIMES OF PASSION II, more. Tattoos is her first appearance in DEATHREALM.

Brooks Caruthers has previous sold fiction to Brownbag Press, THREE-FISTED TALES OF BOB, and STILL DEAD. He lives in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Jeanne Cavelos is best known as editor of the Dell/Abyss horror line. She has recently begun the Dell/Cutting Edge line, which will focus on suspense and psychological terror.

Pam Chillemi-Yeager, a native Pennsylvanian, has studied clinical social work at Temple University. Her work has appeared in AFTER HOURS, BEST OF THE MIDWEST'S SF/F/H, HEART ATTACK, and HELIO-CENTRIC NET, among others. She is currently marketing her first novel.

Dan D'Amassa, Providence, RI's most prolific horror veteran, has had fiction and non-fiction alike published in many, many magazines and anthologies, such as CTHULHU'S HEIRS, DEATHPORT, BIZARRE BAZAAR '93, SCIENCE FICTION CHRONICLE, more. A Tight Situation is his second DEATHREALM appearance.

Chris Friend of West Union, WV is becoming more and more visible among small press publications. DEATHREALM has played host to his horrible face(s) several times in the past.

Lawrence Greenberg lives in New York City, and has had poetry published in GRUE as well as SPACE & TIME, and his short fiction has been accepted or published in numerous markets such as NON-STOP, BORDERLANDS IV, and the next HWA anthology, GHOSTS, edited Peter Straub. His nonfiction may be found in THE SCREAM FACTORY, and THE COMPLETE VAMPIRE COMPANION, among others.

Michael Guse is a location scout living in Portland, OR. He has a second story coming up in a future issue of DEATHREALM as well as in PULPHOUSE. He's currently working on a horror novel set in the jungles of French Guiana.

Jeff Haas is a staff artist for ALTERNATE HILARITIES and formerly for the late, lamented HEART ATTACK Magazine. He has illustrated for Tails BIZARRE BAZAAR, Straight Jacket Press and Full Moon Publications. He has placed as a finalist in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future for several years.

Law "Moose" Hartman, of St. Petersburg, FL, has been a professional artist for many years, having painted portraits for numerous big names in the rock music industry, among other feats. He and ye editor were college mates at the University of Georgia in the late 70s and early 80s, then fell out of touch for a full decade. Then, Hartman found him again, and trouble is brewing.

Randy Johnston has been reviewing books for DEATHREALM for several years now. A resident of Oklahoma City, OK, Randy is former editor of FILM EXPERIENCE, a high-quality fanzine devoted to the bizarre cinema.

Allen Koszowski's list of published art pieces is long and impressive, numbering in the thousands. A healthy sampling of them have appeared in previous DEATHREALMS, as well as markets like ELDRITCH TALES, CRYPT OF CTHULHU, 2AM, BIZARRE BAZAAR, GRUE, CEMETERY DANCE, and on and on.... Allen lives in Upper Darby, PA.

D. F. Lewis's published works have surpassed the 500 mark. The last issue of DEATHREALM featured an excellent profile of this enigmatic, eloquent Brit of horrifying and horrible words.

Andrea Locke, of Charlotte, NC, has been DEATHREALM's resident villainess ("The Lady You Love to Hate") for several years and is still going strong. Ms. Locke is a contributing editor to Dark Regions Press' upcoming YEAR'S BEST OF THE SMALL PRESS.

Keith Minnion has been showing up in DEATHREALM with alarming frequency as of late, probably due to the fact that he does such scary stuff. His artwork has also appeared in WEIRD TALES, BIZARRE BAZAAR, CEMETERY DANCE and others, and his short fiction has been published in MZB'S FANTASY MAGAZINE, ASIMOV'S, and DRAGON MAGAZINE.

Greg K. Puckett, of Lexington, KY, is a graduate of the University of Kentucky and has stopped three hours and a thesis shy of a masters degree in literature. Two of his short stories won the Dantzier Award for Fiction at U of KY in consecutive years.

Wayne Allen Sallee, of Chicago, is another of the horror/dark fantasy genre's most recognizable names, with several hundred published short stories and poems to his credit. His first novel, THE HOLY TERROR, was released in 1992, and his next, THE PAINKILLER, is shortly forthcoming.

Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Seattle, WA, is one of the most well-known and respected authors in the field of the Bizarre. She's had numerous novels published by various houses, including ANTHONY SHRIEK, from Dell/Abyss. She is currently pitching ambitious proposals at Epicenter and Sasquatch Presses that will hopefully come to fruition in the nearest of futures.

Michael Thom, of Pocola, OK, has been a professional fantasy, horror and SF artist for about a year, doing commissioned work through Mystic Domain, a game shop in Fort Smith, AR. His piece in this issue is his first published appearance in a periodical.

David Transue has appeared in many small press publications over the years, and has made an impressive comeback after an extended hiatus. He lives in Binghamton, NY.

Karl Edward Wagner, DEATHREALM's resident shrink, lives in Chapel Hill, NC, about 50 miles from Greensboro, much to the chagrin of certain sensitive parties. He's well known for his role as the editor of DAW's YEAR'S BEST HORROR series, as well as for numerous novels and short stories spanning 3 decades.

Jim Zimmerman of Chester, MD, has been in the art business for many years, and has had work published in a number of "Amber-zines"—fan magazines based on Roger Zelazny's well-known NINE PRINCES IN AMBER fantasy series. He has recently been in on the development of a new comic magazine called EXPOSE.